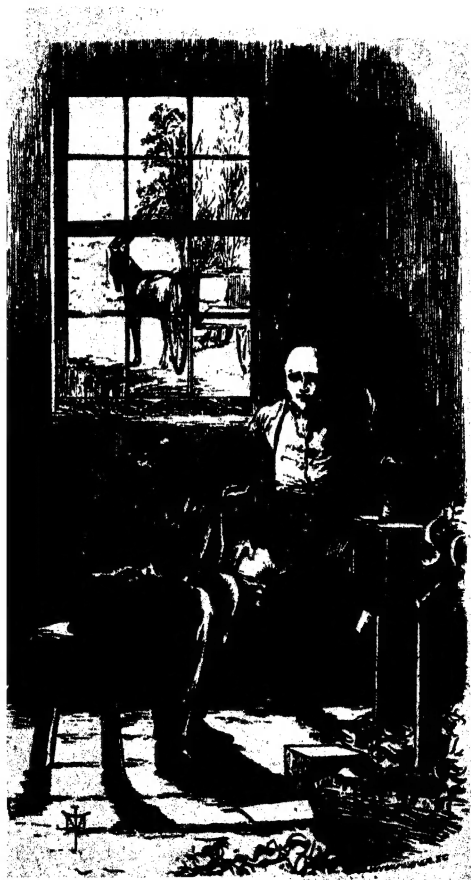




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# The Carpenter's Family :

*A SKETCH OF VILLAGE LIFE.*

BY

MRS. JOSEPH LAMB

(RUTH BUCK).

'He is the God that maketh men to b

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# THE CARPENTER'S FAMILY.

## A SKETCH OF VILLAGE LIFE.

### CHAPTER I.

#### THE VACANT PLACE BY THE HEARTH.

"AH, dear me! Poor Margaret! Surely you must be mistaken: I saw her only this very morning."

"And so did I. Then she was alive, and, though only poorly, I never thought there was anything amiss with her out of the common way. It was to be expected that she should be ailing, for she never was what you might call a strong woman."

"No, and, to tell the truth, I had my fears. She was a deal like our poor Susan, my second sister, as died two years come Martinmas, and I thought it would be well if she got over it. But I wasn't prepared for such news. It's awfully sudden."

"What will it be for poor George when he comes?"

"Isn't he at home then?"

"No; he is working at two cottages about six miles off, and it was too far to come and go every day, so, for a fortnight past, he has only been home twice a week. This is Friday. He would leave her yesterday morning, and expect to see her again to-morrow night. It'll be a sorrowful coming home."

"Has he been sent for?"

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"Yes. His brother-in-law went for him about an hour since. I wouldn't have the news to tell for a sovereign."

"No more would I. I doubt he will be quite over-set, for he lived very comfortably with poor Margaret, I believe."

"Oh, very. He was a bit sharp at times when anything put him out, but I always used to say she was made on purpose for him. She never said a word to aggravate him, but would just speak as softly as though there was nought amiss, and so it would pass over."

"I wish I could do that, but I'm one of the straightforward sort. I must speak what I think, and if a thing comes into my mind I *out with it* whether my master's pleased or vexed. Sometimes I could bite my tongue for it after, when John has, maybe, gone out in a passion and it's too late to mend matters."

"Margaret was as straightforward as anybody, but the real truth is she was a Christian woman. She didn't trust in her own strength, but looked for help to One as both hears and answers prayer."

"Aye, poor thing! She was the fitter to be called away on a sudden. We needn't mourn after her, for she's well taken care of. It's those that are left behind that are to be pitied."

"Let me see. There are two children—little Margaret and Freddy."

"Three now. You forget the baby."

"Eh, poor little thing! Is it living?"

"Yes, and likely enough to be spared. I'm sure I thought to myself, It's hard to understand. There was the mother, whose life was so precious and seemed so needful to her family, taken away, as one may say, in a moment, and the little baby, which can only be a handful of trouble to its father, left behind. But these things are not for us to complain of. The Lord's ways are not as our ways."

The speaker and listener shook their heads in

mournful concord, and then parted, taking the way not to their several homes, but to spread the sorrowful tidings of their neighbour's death amongst their acquaintances in the village.

Margaret Robertson, the subject of the foregoing conversation, was the wife of the village carpenter, a steady, hard-working fellow enough, somewhat short-tempered, as has been hinted, but, on the whole, a good, loving husband and father. Margaret herself was his superior in education, but she truly loved her husband, whose strong sense and natural abilities made up for many little defects. Being of a gentle, yielding nature, and, as one of the above-mentioned speakers expressively remarked, a Christian woman, the little differences of taste and temper between herself and George caused no disunion. They had two children, twins, about nine years old; and now, after this long period, a third child was added to the carpenter's family. But, alas for the poor husband! The gift of the infant proved a fatal one, for it cost the mother's life; and now, as will have already been gathered from the conversation reported, a relative had started to convey the sad tidings to the bereaved husband, and to bring him back to his desolated hearth.

Such a bereavement always arouses abundant sympathy, especially amongst those who are themselves wives and mothers. The good dames of Birkdale were no exception to the rule, and there was not a matron in the village who would not have cheerfully devoted her best powers of mind and body, if by so doing she could have softened the blow which had fallen upon husband and children.

But the two persons on whom devolved the necessary arrangements were the sisters of the deceased woman. They were both married, and resided at no great distance from George Robertson's home. Though their means were somewhat greater, inasmuch as they were farmers' wives, they had always looked up to Margaret, because, as they said, she had

been better brought up than themselves, and had even been to a boarding-school in her young days, a circumstance which was in itself no small distinction.

These advantages Margaret owed to the partiality of a widowed aunt, who took her when very young, treated her as a daughter, gave her a superior education, and led both the girl and her parents to believe that she would in due time inherit the ample means in which she had long shared. But, contrary to all expectation, the widow was induced to lay aside her weeds, and to become a wife for the second time. Without securing any portion of her means, she was united to a man much younger than herself, and just lived long enough to see a great portion of her property wasted, and to regret bitterly this imprudent and unequal marriage.

Margaret, in spite of many annoyances and much domestic strife, stayed with her aunt to the last, and when she could no longer be of service returned to the home of her parents. When George Robertson sought her in marriage her sisters spoke out loudly against the match, declaring that Margaret ought to "make better of herself." Even they who had had "no bringing-up at all in comparison" had married farmers, and here was Margaret, younger, better-looking, and superior in education, willing to throw herself away on a mere village mechanic. The parents, however, homely folk, were easily brought to consent. The young man was honest, industrious, and respectable. He was in business for himself, though in a small way, and could earn their daughter a comfortable livelihood. They had no money to give her, Margaret liked him, and so the affair was settled. Of course they hinted, aside, that had the girl come into her aunt's fortune things would have been different; but she had not a sixpence, and though, according to the old proverb—

"When house, and land, and money's spent,  
Then learning is most excellent"—

Margaret's parents did not deem that their daughter's superior bringing-up ought to count as dowry.

The old folks died not long after Margaret's marriage; but her sisters, Mrs. Martin and Mrs. Pierson, always treated George Robertson in a patronising fashion, and hinted that he had been elevated in the social scale by his marriage with their sister. This gave Robertson little concern. Ever sensible of Margaret's many excellent qualities, he thanked God for giving him a good and prudent wife, and when his sisters-in-law exalted her he readily acknowledged the truth of all their assertions, but said, only *he* knew her full value. By agreeing with these patronising folk he took the most effectual means of silencing them, and prevented their remarks from becoming offensive.

Farmer Martin, husband of the eldest sister, being the possessor of a gig, was deputed to break the tidings of poor Robertson's loss to him—the bereaved husband—and to bring him home. The honest farmer felt all the difficulty of the task, and often checked the pace of his good horse, as it sped onward, in order to gain time and nerve himself for his painful duty. Yet, when he arrived, his heart failed him, and he knew not what to say. However, his very presence told Robertson that something unusual must have occurred, and his first thought was of Margaret, his earliest inquiry respecting her.

"You have another little baby, George, a boy," blurted out the honest farmer, evading a direct answer.

"But Margaret! How is my wife?"

Martin was silent; but his face full of honest sympathy, the moisture that would gather in his eyes, his utter inability to frame words in which to reply, were more eloquent than speech. George Robertson needed not that his voice should confirm what his looks told too plainly, and covering his face with his hands, he cried, "O God, help me to bear this great trial!"



There was a brief silence, which the farmer was unwilling to break; but at length he said, "You'll go home with me, George?"

"Home? Yes, I suppose I must go back to Birkdale, but what is there of home left when wife and mother are taken? My poor dear Margaret! And to think I left her but yesterday morning!"

A painful burst of grief followed, and again good farmer Martin was at a loss what to say, but at length he whispered, "George, you forget the children. Poor things, since she is taken there's the more need for you to be with them."

This was enough. Without further hesitation Robertson put aside his tools, resumed his coat, and seated himself by his brother-in-law in the gig; and Martin, feeling much relieved that this part of his task was over, turned his horse's head in the direction of Birkdale. In less than an hour George was once more within those walls where he had spent ten happy years with Margaret, during every day of which he had been thankfully sensible of the value of that treasure now so suddenly and sadly taken away.

## CHAPTER II.

### A NEW HOUSEKEEPER FOR GEORGE ROBERTSON.

THE little baby boy—whose birth had cost so much, and to whom might well have been given the name which patriarch Jacob's favourite wife bestowed upon her infant before her own eyes closed in death—seemed but a feeble creature. It cost Aunt Martin much time and pains to soothe its wailing, and, when at last it slept, she said as she laid it gently down in the cradle, "It would be a great mercy if it would please God to take it too."

She spoke, as many do under similar circumstances, seeing nothing beyond the present moment, and thinking only of the anxious care and pains which must be expended before that frail bud should expand into a flower. People are very apt to fix a trifling value upon infant life, forgetting that from these tiny seeds of mortality spring up the men and women to whom the carrying on of the world's work is intrusted. Aye, and they likewise forget that the mortal part is joined to immortality.

Aunts Pierson and Martin had but one opinion on this or indeed any subject, and when the latter expressed hers the former confirmed it. "It would be a great blessing. I'm sure I don't know what George will do. If little Margaret were only four or five years older she could keep house well enough."

"But she isn't. There must be a housekeeper of some sort."

Mrs. Pierson lifted her head and looked keenly at her sister. "I know what you're thinking of.

Hannah," she said. "You're thinking if George should marry again?"

"That's true enough. One can't help these things coming into one's head, and there's Margaret's children. He would never get another like her that's gone; for what woman but herself with such a bringing-up would have married a country carpenter? Not but what he has been a good husband, I must say that for George. Poor fellow! He looks quite broken down."

"Aye, I've seen men suffer as much, and be as much in earnest, too, and they've been married within the twelvemonth. There was John Burton. Nobody ever made more fuss about a wife than he did, and, dear heart, he wasn't six months a widower. It's just those men that have been comfortable in married life that can't settle down like single ones again. I suppose it's natural."

"Well, Jane," returned Aunt Martin, with much determination of manner, "it may seem natural to *some* folks, and I have heard people say a man pays a compliment to his first wife by getting another soon after he loses her, but if I should die before my husband—which for the poor bairns' sake I pray I may not, or at any rate not while they're young—I should consider he paid me a better one by remaining a widower for my sake."

"I hardly know," replied Aunt Pierson, who was of a gentler and less prejudiced nature than her energetic sister. "'Circumstances alter cases;' and then, you see, if we were left, we shouldn't like to be tied either to marry or let it alone, so I don't see why a man should be."

"We have our feelings, Jane, and I can't help mine. I dare say it's better if we can look upon things in that easy light, and think of our children being under somebody else when we're gone without troubling ourselves about their bringing-up. I suppose," continued Aunt Martin with an air of resigna-

tion, "we should be willing to leave them in higher hands, but——"

"Let's hope we may be spared to do our duty to our own children," interposed Aunt Pierson, foreseeing a somewhat doleful speech from her sister, whom she knew to be far from exercising the spirit of Christian resignation to which she alluded. "And now, about George and poor Margaret's children. We must see for somebody. The funeral will be to-morrow, and after that I must be at home, for you know, sister, that a farm-house without the mistress is like a churn without a dasher and hands to move it. The work will no more go on than the cream will turn itself into butter."

"I know that to my cost, and shall, this week, with being so much away from home. We can neither of us stay after to-morrow, for your days are the same as mine both for churning and washing, so we'd better talk things over with George, and settle about somebody to come at once."

The other sister acquiesced, and Robertson was called to take part in the conference respecting a matter which must greatly affect his future comfort.

"We've been thinking, George," said Mrs. Martin, "that we had better look out for you a sort of house-keeper. You see, we have our hands pretty full at home, for farmers' wives must work hard in the best of times, and we have families to look after, so as the thing must be settled it is as well to arrange soon as later."

"Certainly. I am very much obliged to you for all your kindness and the trouble you have taken since——since——"

The man's voice faltered. He could not yet allude to his bereavement without emotion. He was, however, interrupted by both sisters, who said, and truly, too, that he was heartily welcome to their services, and expressed their earnest wish to serve him and his children as far as lay in their power.

"Have you thought of anybody, George?" asked Mrs. Pierson.

"I had not," returned Robertson, "for I have been so stupified, as I may say, with what has happened, that I really had no heart to plan anything. Mrs. Raynor called to-day while you were away at your own homes, and she mentioned a person she thought likely to suit. You know James Richards has had a sister staying at his house for some months past; for his wife has been ailing lately, and, as his daughter Ellen was in a good place at the vicarage, he and her mother were unwilling to take her away if it could be helped. I dare say you know the woman. She is a nice, cleanly body, a widow; and as her children were grown up and settled, she came to stay at her brother James's, to assist his wife. Mrs. Raynor knows something of her ways too, for when the children were so ill of scarlet fever, she went to the vicarage and sat up with them sometimes, to relieve her niece."

"I know who you mean well enough, George," said Mrs. Martin. "And you do too, sister Pierson. It's Mrs. Wilkinson, Sally Richards that was, though maybe you'd hardly remember her in her maiden days; for she went to service young, and married at a distance from Birkdale. I can't say that I think she would suit you, George."

"Why not, Hannah?"

"Well, there's more than one reason, George. In the first place, she's rather far on in years—near fifty, I should say; and it wants an active body to look after three children, and one of 'em a baby."

"She's very active," was the reply. George had nearly added that there was no more energetic house-keeper in or about Birkdale than Mrs. Martin herself, and yet there could be very little difference in point of years between her and the Widow Wilkinson. On the whole, however, he thought it best to be silent on this point, as a comparison of the sort might not have proved acceptable to his relative.

"But, George," answered Mrs. Martin, who, as usual, acted as mouthpiece for both her sister and herself, "Mrs. Wilkinson would be certain to want rather high wages. A woman who has come to her years puts a pretty good price upon her work, I can tell you. Then she'd never be either able or willing to do all by herself."

George thought of his own wife, who, though nurtured far more tenderly and carefully than her sisters, had willingly performed the whole of her household duties with but occasional help from one of their humble neighbours. He had made no answer, however, when his sister-in-law again took up the subject.

"Of course, George, if you feel at liberty to pay a high wage to Mrs. Wilkinson and keep her another servant, or have a charwoman four days out of six, I dare say she would do well enough. But Jane and I had been thinking of a young girl, Mary Jones; you know her, I think; our labourer's eldest daughter. She's about sixteen, and her mother wants a place for her."

"But she would be very young to take care of a baby, Hannah."

"I wish every mother knew as well how to take care of hers. Why, that girl is the eldest of ten, all living, and she's hardly ever had a child out of her arms since she was big enough to hold one. What her mother will do without her I can't think, for Mary is so handy, and there's such a swarm of little things to work for. But then again, so many mouths take a great deal of filling, and, badly as the girl can be spared, they must lessen the number, if possible. Mrs. Jones will let her come for her meat and a very trifle of wages, if you like."

George Robertson hesitated before he made any reply. He was unwilling to disoblige his sisters-in-law, who, he believed, wished to do what was the best for him and his children; but he could hardly reconcile

their opinion with his own judgment. Whatever experience this young girl might have had amongst her own little brothers and sisters at home, she was not acting in place of a mother, but under one, while there.

"What do you think of it, Jane?" said he, turning to Mrs. Pierson. He knew the question was a superfluous one, as the younger sister always followed Mrs. Martin's lead, and was swayed by her opinion.

"I think Mary Jones would be the very girl for you," was the prompt reply.

"Then I'd better speak to her mother at once," said Mrs. Martin, willing to strike whilst the iron was hot, and adding, as a sort of compromise, for she saw that George's reason was by no means satisfied, "Sarah Wilkinson isn't likely to leave Birkdale just yet; for though her sister-in-law is a deal better, and James Richards thinks his wife has come round wonderfully, all things considered, the doctor says she can't stand much work now."

"It's allays been my opinion that Mrs. Richards would never be the woman she was before this illness," interposed Mrs. Pierson, seeing an opportunity for putting in a word without fear of contradicting her sister.

"That's just it. Harvesting is rather trying work when anybody isn't strong, and she got wet at the very beginning, and took such a cold as she'll never quite get over the effects of. So, though she is better, James doesn't like his sister to leave her yet, for fear she should upset herself. As it happens, this is lucky for us, too, since it gives you the chance of trying Mary Jones, and if she shouldn't suit, why, you can send her away and engage Mrs. Wilkinson."

There seemed no help for it. George, depressed, almost prostrated by his recent bereavement, was in the hands of these determined matrons as pliable as wax. They had their own way, and Mary Jones was engaged to come on the following morning, Aunts Martin and Pierson having promised their alternate

superintendence, and pledged themselves to call daily and instruct the young housekeeper in all matters concerning which her own knowledge and experience should prove insufficient.

"To think of Mrs. Raynor recommending Sarah Wilkinson to be George's housekeeper," said Mrs. Martin, as soon as she was alone with her sister. "It's easy to see who would be the next visitor. That Ellen Richards would be in and out continually, if her aunt were to come here, and she'd be the very one to wheedle George into marrying her within six months. I should never ha' forgiven myself if I hadn't done all in my power to keep her away. Just fancy *her* in poor Margaret's shoes, and the poor dear children knowing no better than to call *her* 'mother,' her as was *my* servant three years since."

"Oh, aye, Ellen was your servant once, and a very clever girl she was. You made her 'go through her degrees' when she was with you."

"Yes, I allays do that. No girl comes into my house without learning how to do everything that a farmer's wife should know, if she has a bit of sense in her."

"I couldn't quite understand why you didn't agree to having Sarah Wilkinson, for she seemed a likely body enough; but I see now how it is, and I quite agree with you. Still, I feel a bit uneasy about trusting poor Margaret's motherless children in the hands of such a young girl as Mary Jones. We must come every day to look after them, poor things! Mary is strong and willing. Still, she is little better than a child herself, and if anything were to happen to them through her ignorance, I should feel as if I had done wrong, and rue it the longest day I had to live."

"To be sure, we shall come every day. I hope, sister, you have never found *me* the one to make a promise and not to keep it. My conscience is as tender as yours."

Mrs. Pierson was immediately subdued. Whenever



her sister began to assert either her dignity or her conscientiousness, she knew better than to add any further comment.

Mrs. Raynor called that evening to know what decision had been arrived at, and was informed by George Robertson of the arrangements made by his sisters-in-law. The good lady looked sorry.

"Perhaps you will think me too intrusive, Robertson," she said; "but I feel deeply both for you and your children. I know something, too, of Mary Jones, and I must own that I think your relatives have incurred a great responsibility in placing your little ones—to say nothing of your own domestic comfort—in such young hands. The girl is strong and good-natured; but, like most of her age, very thoughtless. She would work well, I doubt not, when constantly under her own industrious mother, or if under a clever, active mistress, but—"

"She will be looked after, ma'am," returned George. "The children's aunts have promised to come, in turns, every morning, and look after Mary. They, you know, are clever housewives, both of them."

"Very much so; but with all the good intentions possible, I greatly doubt whether they will long be able to perform their promise. They have families of their own, and the wives of small farmers, such as Martin and Pierson, lead very busy lives. Their mornings are especially precious, and to leave home every other day and walk a mile down to the village, and the same back—I hardly think they will find it

"Well, ma'am, I had some misgivings myself, especially about the poor little baby, bless it. I may call it Margaret's last legacy." He waited to recover himself a little, then said, "But as the women were so set upon Mary Jones, I agreed to give her two or three weeks' trial, thinking, from what you told me, I could still engage Mrs. Wilkinson, should the girl prove unfit for the work."

"I am sorry that has formed any part of your calculation, Robertson. As you have decided, I must tell you that Sarah Wilkinson has the offer of another situation. My husband's sister is about to be married to a gentleman of ample means, and is anxious to engage Mrs. Wilkinson, whose character is well known to her, as housekeeper. She will be a most valuable servant; but had you decided on taking her, she would have relinquished the idea, and Mrs. Wilkinson herself would have accepted less wages from you, in order to remain near her brother and sister-in-law at Birkdale. Her niece, Ellen Richards, is also going to live under the same roof."

"Indeed, ma'am," said George, not a little surprised at this intelligence; "I thought you wouldn't be likely to part with Ellen Richards."

"Nor should I, Robertson, under other circumstances; but you are aware that I lost my two youngest darlings when the fever was raging in Birkdale. The two elder boys go to school, and the others are to be placed under a nursery governess, so that I have less need for a nurse now, and it will, therefore, be to Ellen's advantage to go into the larger establishment of which my sister-in-law will be the mistress ere long. Besides, she will be the companion of her worthy aunt, and no doubt the two will work admirably together, and their services be highly valued. And now, Robertson, I sincerely hope all will go well with you and yours. Be sure, if either Mr. Raynor or myself can be of service, we shall be only too glad."

She extended her hand and shook that of George very kindly as he thanked her for all her good will. Then, with an earnestly expressed hope that God would bless and comfort him, and that his children might be a source of happiness to their bereaved father, she left the house and returned to the vicarage. Arrived there, she gave her husband an account of the ill-success of her mission, and expressed her

astonishment at the blindness of the two mothers, who could prefer a heedless girl to a steady, experienced woman, herself the parent of a grown-up family.

"My dear Emily," returned the Vicar, "you show much less than your usual penetration, if you feel surprised at the course these folk have taken. My sister will be the gainer by their prejudice, though; for had they acted unselfishly and according to the dictates of common sense, she would have lost the services of a worthy woman."

"I don't quite see that they are selfish, dear, because much trouble and anxiety will result to them from this unwise choice. As to prejudice, why, you do not mean—"

"Ah! I see by the light which is breaking across your face that you at length comprehend what most women would have arrived at in a moment. These farmeresses had made up their minds that you not only wished to find a situation for Mrs. Wilkinson, but a husband for Ellen Richards, and however disinclined they might have been to remain single themselves, they will do all in their power to keep George Robertson so. They of course were not aware that Ellen Richards is about to leave Birkdale, or they might have listened with more favour to your recommendation of her aunt."

## CHAPTER III.

### "NEW BROOMS SWEEP CLEAN"—A TEMPTATION.

WITHIN a week after Margaret Robertson's funeral several unexpected changes took place in Birkdale, besides the installation of Mary Jones and the departure of Mrs. Wilkinson and her niece, Ellen Richards, for more distant situations. The good folks of the village learned that they were to lose their Vicar. Mr. Raynor had spent ten years at Birkdale, and had greatly endeared himself to his parishioners, not only by a faithful ministration of those spiritual things entrusted to his care, but by his kindness as a man. Ever ready with words of advice, warning, and comfort, he yet refrained from giving offence or exceeding his commission by any unwarrantable intrusion with respect to temporal matters, or by dictating where counsel only was needed. He made his people sensible that, when he did speak, he was moved by no selfishness, but by an earnest desire to promote their best interests, and as actuated by that spirit of love which impels the disciples of Christ in their dealings one with another. The news that he was about to be removed to a still more important charge spread no small regret throughout Birkdale, even while his parishioners rejoiced in the knowledge that his sphere of usefulness would be increased, and his income greatly enlarged also. It was indeed hard to tell whether he or his excellent wife would be most regretted by those amongst whom they had laboured together. But sorrow could not alter the fact that within another month or thereabouts the Vicarage would lose its present master and mistress.

At first it seemed likely that George Robertson's young housekeeper would justify the commendations of Mrs. Martin. The girl was kind to the children, and the good dames, according to promise, exercised a vigilant superintendence over her doings, so that when the master of the house returned he usually found things looking pretty comfortable, apart from that terrible blank which the sight of *one vacant place* caused him to feel. Nobody knew, though, except themselves, what it cost the two sisters to keep their promise. The time devoted to the instruction of Mary Jones and the supervision of their brother-in-law's home and family could ill be spared from their own, and in proportion to the benefit conferred on the one side by their presence was the injury done to their own household arrangements on the other by their absence. Their husbands, too, were anything but satisfied, and Mrs. Pierson complained to her sister that "her master" had been awfully put out because she happened to be away when he specially wanted to consult her about the purchase of another milch cow, and the sale of sundry calves.

"He was so vexed," she said, "that he neither bought the cow nor sold the calves; which will be a great loss to me, for she was a beautiful milker, and I've been very scarce of butter lately, owing to the feeding of so many young ones."

The "butter money" being the perquisite of the farmer's wife, the addition of another cow is so much extra profit without any accompanying expense, the farmer being answerable for its keep.

"Dear, dear, that is a pity," returned Mrs. Martin, fully alive to the importance of the transaction. "I haven't got off scot free either; for I missed the selling of some poultry that I wanted to be rid of this very morning, by being down at George's. I should have made more of them than I expect to do at market. But, as I say, there's not many would do what *we* do for George and his children."

Mrs. Martin either forgot or did not choose to remember, that had Mrs. Raynor's sensible advice been taken this constant tax upon her own and her sister's time would have been avoided.

"I told my husband that," was Mrs. Pierson's reply, "and all I got by it was that if I had let George engage Ellen Richards' aunt she would have wanted no looking after, so I needn't go be making a martyr of myself. I hadn't done it half so much to help George and his motherless children, as from a wish to keep Ellen out of his house."

"That's just the thanks one gets for slaving morn, noon, and night. Well, the young woman is gone now, and Mary Jones is really getting very handy. I told my husband this morning that in a few days more she would be able to do without so much looking after, and that it would only be necessary to drop in now and then instead of every morning. If I were you I would tell Pierson the same. Maybe he'll buy the cow after all."

"I doubt she'll be gone, for she was a real bargain, and I wonder Pierson could find in his heart to let her pass him, even though he was cross, for we've keeping for a couple more cows and nothing else to eat it. However, I'll tell him I shall not have to go to George's more than another week regular."

The sisters said no more on the subject, but they quite understood each other without further explanation. The real fact was that they were sadly tired of their self-assumed task, and would probably have ceased their daily visits still sooner had not the departure of the Vicar and his family been delayed some weeks beyond the appointed time. So long as Mrs. Raynor's eye was upon them, they were determined that there should be no flaw in George's housekeeping. "She should not have the chance of casting any reproach at them, or of saying things would have been better if her advice had been taken." In this spirit they continued their superintendence,

and when Mrs. Raynor called with her husband to say farewell to George Robertson, the good lady warmly congratulated him on the exceedingly creditable manner in which his youthful housekeeper performed her duties, and frankly owned that he owed much to the zeal and kindness of his sisters-in-law. George acknowledged his obligations to them, and said they had done what he could never have asked or expected for him and his; showed her the baby, and pointed out with all a father's tenderness how its once pale cheeks were growing rosy and its tiny arms plump and round, while the young nurse looked extremely proud of its improved appearance and her own share in producing it. Altogether the little home was well managed, and Mrs. Raynor felt honestly glad that her forebodings on the score of Mary's capabilities had not been justified by the result. Two days afterwards she, her husband, and family, left Birkdale for a new home in a distant county.

In the meanwhile Mrs. Pierson had obtained her heart's desire, and become the possessor of the coveted cow. Her husband himself had felt little pleased at losing—even by his own fit of ill temper—the opportunity of supplying a want in his farmyard, and obtaining at the same time an undoubted bargain. So as the cow was not yet disposed of, and his help-mate made a solemn promise that after the end of another week she would stay at home in the mornings and confine herself to the superintendence of her own household, he made the purchase. Mrs. Pierson had also an opportunity of exulting in another way, for a rise in the market enabled her husband to sell the aforementioned calves at a higher price than he could have obtained on the previous occasion, and though he said that "it was more by good luck than good management" that things had turned out so well, he was highly gratified on pocketing the extra cash.

In accordance with an arrangement previously made, Mrs. Martin undertook to satisfy her brother-

in-law that such frequent visits from her sister and herself were no longer necessary. "You see, George," said she, "we have got Mary into our ways very nicely, and we're thinking of giving her a trial by herself. Girls never learn to manage thoroughly if you are always at their heels, so Jane and me have settled that, for a week or so, we shall not come down in the mornings."

"She has done wonders so far," replied George, "and I know what pains you have taken, and how kind you have been in coming day after day. I could never have expected you to take so much trouble, or that Martin would have been willing, either."

"I don't deny, George, that it has been a loss both to me and Jane, for—eh, dear me—'when the cat's away the mice will play,' and there's that girl I hired last Martinmas, though I've taken such pains with her, and she *can* do if she likes, is good for nothing when my back's turned. They're all idle and worthless when a mistress is out of the house."

Here the speaker paused, and coloured deeply. In her anxiety to magnify her own services, she forgot that in this relation of her domestic experiences she was giving a practical denial to the lesson she had, the moment before, striven to impress upon her brother-in-law, namely, that it was expedient to leave servants to themselves sometimes, in order to test their capabilities. Her confusion did not escape his notice, and he readily guessed its cause. Before he could make any comment, she added, "Not that Mary Jones is like the common run of young girls. Her mother kept her in, and trained her well, from a little thing, and Jane and I mean to look after her still, only we think she will manage without quite so much telling and watching."

George could but assent, and hope that all would go on well. Mrs. Martin received his thanks for all she had done, and, perfectly satisfied with the result, called and told her sister how nicely they were now



freed from the promise, of which the fulfilment had proved so irksome and inconvenient.

It had been agreed that Mary Jones should not be told that her "two missises," as she called them, had resolved to visit her less frequently. It was part of the policy of the two sisters that she should be allowed to expect them as usual, in order that, being in continual suspense, and ignorant when they might drop in, the girl might be afraid to neglect any portion of her duty. This answered very well for a few days, and when the sisters paid an evening call at George's house, they were more than satisfied at the appearance of things. Certainly Margaret and Freddy had been kept from school in turn, and once both together, to nurse the baby; but then, what could the girl do else, they argued, when Robertson mentioned this circumstance with some regret. *They* were obliged to do the very same thing themselves on extra busy days. Children's time was of less value than that of grown-up people, and Maggie and little Fred were young enough yet for so much schooling.

George was silenced, though not convinced, and resolved to interfere, in order to prevent his children from being kept at home, even though he should have to hire a nurse for the baby.

On the following morning Mrs. Jones dropped in to see how her daughter was getting on. She found her vainly trying to pacify the screaming infant, while the breakfast things stood unwashed on the table, and other parts of the house showed signs of neglect.

"I am glad you've come," said the girl; "I'm just wearied out with this baby. He won't be good."

She gave the little creature a shake, which did not improve matters, as though she were tired of trying gentle means.

"Poor thing! Give it to me, and I'll try if I can quiet it. You musn't be cross with it," continued the woman, her motherly feelings aroused in favour of the infant.

"I'm not cross, mother, in a general way; only I was just set fast with my work, and if either of my missuses should come and find things at sixes and sevens, I should get a scolding, for all I couldn't help it."

"They haven't been lately, I reckon, Mary."

"Not for more than a fortnight in mornings, but there's no knowing when they may."

"I don't think you'll have much more of their company. I happen to know they've got tired of leaving their own houses to manage themselves, and that their husbands weren't suited either."

"Whatever shall I do?" cried Mary, dismayed at the idea of being left entirely to her own resources. "If they did look pretty sharp after things, they helped me a deal. I never can get on by myself."

"I should like you to keep the place, though," returned her mother, "for you have a deal better wages here than you would have anywhere else, and that sweetens work."

"But if the child should be as he has been this morning—cry, cry, cry—till I couldn't do a hand-stir?"

"Why, then you'll have to do as I am forced to do wi' my little 'uns on washing days, and so on."

The girl looked anxiously at her mother, then gave a half-frightened glance towards the door. Mrs. Jones understood the meaning of it, and, rising from her seat, she opened it, gazed carefully both ways, to see that no one was coming, and having satisfied herself that there was no danger of interruption, took a small bottle from her pocket, which she handed to Mary. "When the baby is cross you must give him half a teaspoonful out of this—not a drop more, mind—and it will soothe him to sleep, and let you get on with your work."

"But, mother," returned Mary, hesitating to take what was offered, "master would be so cross if he knew me give baby a drop of this stuff. If there's

one thing above another that he is particular about, it is that it should never have anything to send it to sleep. He says that many a child in Birkdale is poisoned by its own mother, and his shall never touch a drop of stuff out of a druggist's shop unless the doctor himself sends it."

"Mary, you ought to be ashamed of yourself to talk about poison, as though *I* would hurt the precious little baby. Have any of mine been poisoned by taking a few drops of this syrup? I've had ten, and I'm thankful to say they're all alive and well at this moment. And I should like to know where anybody would find a healthier girl than you are. You was my first, and when you was only a few weeks old, your father took ill, and right through the harvest was fast in bed, and not able to do a handstir. And I should have been fast in the house, too, and we might have had to be on the parish, if an old neighbour of mine—Sally Wynn—hadn't put me up to giving you a drop of her "*Quietness*," as she called it, now and then. That set me free to work, and I earned a'most as much as a man all that harvest. It's put many a pound into my pocket since, and now here's my own girl goes talking to her mother about poison."

Mary was about to speak, but Mrs. Jones, rising from her seat in high indignation, declared she should have her husband home to dinner before it was ready, and that her daughter must take the baby that minute. The girl began to apologise. "I didn't mean anything, mother. I'm sure you wouldn't hurt either this baby or any other. I only told you what master said."

"Ah, well! I must go, or my master will sing me a song if dinner is not ready. My only thought was to help you, and, though I say it, no mother has loved her children better, or brought them up more decently according to their means than I have."

Mary was naturally grieved at her mother's words, and more than half convinced that she must be right.

In recommending the contents of the bottle for George Robertson's baby, she was only advising her daughter to follow her own example. She had been a good mother, was reckoned notable and industrious, and was cited as an example in Birkdale. "Beside"—here Mary caught a glimpse of her own healthy-looking, if somewhat sunburnt countenance, in the little mirror which hung on the wall—"she was strong and well; none the worse for what her mother had given her during her baby days; and why should her master's child suffer if she were to pursue a similar plan, of which, indeed, he would never know?" She was inclined to take the bottle and use its contents. A very little incident decided her on doing so.

Mrs. Jones was up, and determined on going that very minute. "Here, my girl," she said, "look sharp and take him. You must dry your hands, and leave the rest of those things till after."

"O mother! couldn't you just stay till I have got the potatoes on for dinner? I shall be ready in five minutes."

Mrs. Jones could have stayed without any serious inconvenience to herself, but she was too much displeased by Mary's conduct, in not only rejecting her advice, but even taking upon herself to doubt whether her mother was right in offering it. "Not another instant," said she; "and it'll be some time before you see my face here again. Things have come to a pretty pass when chits like you set yourselves up to teach your mothers, and talk about poison! I sha'n't forget that in a hurry."

"O mother! I only told you what master said," returned Mary, with tearful eyes, and extending her half-wet hands to take the infant, which was still asleep.

Whether in Mrs. Jones's state of mind she was unconscious of a corresponding feeling of bodily irritation, or whether the movement was intentional, cannot

be told ; certain it is that in passing the baby to her daughter, she gave it a jerk, and roused it most effectually, as was shown by a renewal of the cries which had greeted Mrs. Jones's ears on entering.

"You'll have a nice time with it, Mary, I doubt. Poor little thing! the least move wakes it. But I must go. Good-bye."

"Mother, stop!" cried Mary. "I think you'd better give it a drop of the stuff before you go."

"Nay, I'll not have it cast at me that I poison people's children. I that have worked early and late for my own."

"But, mother, I know you wouldn't advise what would hurt little Willie, and how shall I get through?" cried Mary, impelled by her mother's evident anger to beg for what she had formerly rejected.

"Well, I'll leave the bottle if you like," replied Mrs. Jones, once more taking it from her pocket.

"I'll get you a spoon, and you can show me exactly how much to give him."

Mary reached the spoon ; her mother poured a small quantity of the sweet soothing liquid into it, and in another moment it was down the baby's throat. Mollified by her daughter's submission and thanks, she did still more ; for before she left the house, she succeeded in lulling the child to sleep and depositing it in the cradle, thus enabling Mary to get through her household work, and have dinner ready before the return of her master.

Yet the girl's conscience was by no means easy after the departure of her mother. She felt that in disobeying her employer's express injunctions, she had done wrong ; and, though the little one lay sleeping peacefully to all appearance, her mind was full of anxious thoughts lest the slumber should last too long. She knew that most of the poor mothers in Birkdale used this "sleeping stuff" for their children ; she had seen her own parent dose her little brothers and sisters with it from their earliest babyhood. She had, beside,

a painful recollection of one particular time, when she, left in charge of the baby at home, had ventured to administer a dose on her own responsibility, and with what terror she had waited for baby's waking. How, when its sleep was prolonged, her terror increased, and that when at last, by dint of shaking the little creature, she succeeded in rousing it, the first feeble scream seemed the sweetest music she had ever heard, and how she had then resolved never again to place herself in such a position.

The sense of wrong pressed heavily upon her now. True, she had acted by her mother's advice, and she, the parent of ten children, ought to know better than herself. But then she had disobeyed her employer—and who so fit to give orders as the master of the house? who so likely to study the good of little Willie Robertson as a loving tender father, that strove to make up to his children for the loss of their mother? True, he might never know that she had proved unfaithful to her trust, but there was *One* who would.

In George Robertson's house, upon the walls of each bedroom, in the parlour and the kitchen alike, might have been seen several plain Scripture texts. They were in large type, with handsome coloured capitals, and had been neatly framed by the carpenter in his leisure hours. Right over the kitchen mantel-piece were the words, "Thou God seest me." They were assigned the most conspicuous place on purpose that the inmates of the house might be always reminded of the constant presence and oversight of God. As Mary Jones went about her work on that morning, she was unable to forget that whether her master ever knew or not, her breach of trust was known by Him who not only marks our outward actions, but is a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart.

The voice of a reproachful conscience, though a "still small voice," is not pleasant to listen to.

Mary Jones felt that morning that little Willie's loudest scream was music in comparison, and inwardly resolved that this first act of disobedience should also be her last with respect to this particular command. She experienced, as all do who make good resolutions in their own strength only, that it is easy to determine upon a right course, but very difficult indeed to persevere in it.

## CHAPTER IV.

### MORE TEMPTATIONS—WRONG CONQUERS RIGHT.

IF Mrs. Jones had been told that she had not only been administering a species of poison to the motherless baby of her neighbour, but one of a still more destructive nature to her own daughter, she would probably have indignantly denied such an accusation. She would have said that she loved her children, and would not hurt them for the world, and that she had only given to George Robertson's baby what she used for her own. Then, as to Mary, she would have deemed herself equally guiltless. She had trained her to be honest, and would have thought herself disgraced for ever if one of her children had been guilty of theft. In like manner a direct lie would have been severely punished by her; yet had she this day given Mary a lesson in falsehood and disobedience without considering it as a sin, but rather a benefit. Like many another, Mrs. Jones *blamed the spoken lie*, but considered it lawful to act a falsehood, and to teach her child to do likewise. That first seed was destined to bring forth bitter fruit, and to convince her to the contrary.

The young housekeeper was accustomed to get her little charge to sleep towards the middle of the day, so that she might be at liberty to attend to the dinner and have all ready for her master and the other children. If, however, the baby did wake up during the noon hour, she was always sure of a nurse either in Margaret or Fred if the father were not at home. But the girl sorely missed the help to which she had



been at first accustomed, and though sometimes Mrs. Martin might be a little sharp, or Mrs. Pierson more petulant and fault-finding than she liked, yet she found it better to have two mistresses than none at all.

On this particular day, little Willie's first dose took full effect. He slept until Robertson had gone back to his shop, and the children to school. Nay, Mary had time to wash up her dinner things, clean the fire-side and change her own frock before a little querulous cry warned her that the heavy slumber was over at last. She had felt very anxious and uncomfortable, and more than once inclined to throw the bottle and its remaining contents on the fire, lest, in case of any evil happening to the child, it should tell the tale of her disobedience.

That afternoon she had to do a double amount of nursing. The child was crosser and far more difficult to manage than usual. He would not let Mary put him out of her arms for a single moment, and the girl was obliged to give him her whole attention until her master came home, for he was quite too much for Margaret or Freddy to manage.

"I wish," thought Mary, "I had never let him have a drop of that sleeping stuff. The little things are always cross when the effect goes off, and one has double trouble. Mother would give him a drop more, I know, but I won't."

When the father came home, he at once took the little one in his strong arms, walked up and down with it, and soothed it tenderly, just as of old, when the twins were infants, he had found it necessary to share the burthen of nursing with his wife. More than this, when there seemed a prospect of a disturbed night, he said, "Mary, my girl, you must let me have food for little Willie, and all that is needful in my room. I shall take care of him to-night myself; I know you have had a troublesome day, and young girls like you cannot work in the day-time and then watch at night. You must have your allowance of sleep."

The girl protested her willingness to sacrifice a portion of her rest for baby's sake. Indeed, her master's uniform fatherly kindness and thought for her comfort made her feel more than ever how blameable was her act of deceit and disobedience.

Robertson, however, persisted. The care of his motherless baby cost him a great part of his night's sleep, but the father was well contented to sacrifice far more than this for his dear Margaret's "last legacy," as he was wont to call the child.

For some days Mary Jones fought against the temptation to use any more of the contents of the bottle which she had carefully hidden away at the bottom of her box. But she had to work single-handed. Neither Mrs. Pierson nor Mrs. Martin came near, except once or twice in company with their husbands during the evening. Sometimes, indeed, not unfrequently, the elder children would be sent for by their aunts, who thus, as they said, took Mary's work off her hands in another way. The twins enjoyed the change, especially when staying at Uncle Pierson's farm, and were in no hurry to return home.

In fact, "poor Margaret's children," as they were generally called, were not a little indulged by their aunts, who seemed desirous of showing them all the kindness in their power. Beside, the good dames settled in their own minds, that to have the twins frequently at their respective homes was a better and much more convenient way of looking after them than the old practice of going to the village every morning to superintend George Robertson's household management.

"Mary will do famously with only the baby," said Mrs. Martin. "She's as fond of it as possible, and the little fellow thrives too."

"I'm sure the girl has done wonders considering her age. I never thought the little thing would live." Both agreed that they had conferred a great benefit on their brother-in-law, when they obtained for him

such a clever housekeeper at such a low rate of wages, and congratulated themselves that Birkdale was rid of Ellen Richards, whose presence might have tempted George to change his condition.

Mary Jones was, however, by no means grateful to her "two missises," as she called them still, for taking away Margaret so often. The little girl was very handy, and could save Mary many steps, as well as do trifling matters in the house. When Robertson was working at a distance of some miles from Birkdale, and the twins away, there was nobody to render any assistance from morning to night. Then Willie's first teeth began to come, and his fretfulness increased. Until this happened, the girl, despite her mother's advice, had kept her resolution. But now came the time of trial, and she yielded. By degrees she persuaded herself that what her mother said must be right; that she, with her ten children, must know better than her master; that, in fact, when dear little Willie was in pain, she was doing him a kindness by administering a dose which should procure him quiet rest. Then, when the effect of one had passed away, another, and a larger, became necessary, and after a time no baby in Birkdale was more dependent on the pernicious "Quietness" for his sleep than was Mary Jones's little charge.

As may be supposed, the girl never bought the "sleeping stuff" herself. Mrs. Jones was always the medium through whom it was obtained, though the money was furnished by Mary. And how? Not out of her wages. All that could be spared from them was given to her mother, for the girl was not undutiful in this respect, and really wished to add a little to the scanty means of her hard-working parents. Not out of Mrs. Jones's own pocket, as has been said. She had enough to do to spare the pence necessary to keep her own little ones supplied with the sleeping potion, which left her hands free to labour for them.

No, George Robertson himself, though all uncon-

scious of the fact, furnished the money for purchasing the infant poison—for we can call the mischievous dose by no lighter name. When the bottle was first empty, Mary applied to her mother for a supply. "Nay, my girl," answered Mrs. Jones, "you can't expect me to find you any more unless you give me money."

"But, mother, I gave you all I had left of my quarter's wages."

"Did ever anybody hear such stuff? As though I should expect you to spend *your* money on it. Nay, my lass, you work hard enough for the bit you get, without giving any of it back again."

"What am I to do? Baby is used to having a drop out of the bottle now, bless him. He'll be so cross, there'll be no bearing if I have none to give him."

"But Mr. Robertson gives you money to spend for the house, doesn't he?"

"Yes, but I always give him an account of every penny, and what I lay it out for. If I were to say that I had spent it in buying the very thing he has ordered me never to bring into his house, what do you think he'd say?"

Mrs. Jones laughed outright. It was washing day, when by agreement she always came to help her daughter, and was duly paid for her day's labour by Robertson. "Really, Mary," she exclaimed, as she dropped into a chair and lifted her apron, with steaming hands, to wipe away the moisture, which her fit of laughter had brought into her eyes. "Really, Mary, you are the stupidest simpleton ever I knew. Do you think I meant you should go and tell your master *right out* what you spent a few pence a week upon?"

"Simpleton or not, mother, I know what would be the end of it. He'd send me *right out* of his doors, and never let me or you either darken them again so long as he lived."

"And you pretend not to understand how to manage! Why all you have to do is just to put a penny at a

time on to something else. Reckon for a little more tea, or an extra half pound of sugar, or soap, at a time, and there you have the money at once."

"But, mother, would that be honest?" was the hesitating question; for, while Mary's conscience whispered doubts, she was yet afraid of irritating her parent by making such an inquiry.

"Honest! As if I would tell you to do what wasn't. You'd try anybody's patience, you would. You could but speak to me in that way if I'd taught you to steal, as I did to walk. And you know that always I have said to my children, 'Never take a pin that doesn't belong to you, for it would be a sin.'"

Mrs. Jones was in a state of high indignation at an inquiry which sounded like an accusation, and was quite prepared to speak her mind still more freely to ask Mary whether she had not, both in life and doctrine, set her an example of honesty; but the girl interrupted her by saying in a tone of much distress, "O mother, mother, don't get so angry, I didn't mean to vex you. I only asked. I'm sure I want to do just what is right both to you and my master."

"It does vex one though, Mary, to hear you talk as if I should encourage my own child in what wasn't honest. But just listen. Do you spend a farthing of your master's money on yourself? I mean, you know, apart from the meat you eat and so on?"

"No, mother, never."

"Do you ever give me, or anybody else, the value of—a cold potato unknown to him?"

"No, mother," again answered Mary, "but if——"

"Stop a minute. Suppose you spend a few pence on getting some 'syrup of poppies,' or 'quietness,' or what not, shall you drink it yourself, or give it away? No, you will buy it for his child, and use it for him."

"But you see, mother, master told me not, and would be so angry if he knew that I——"

"Trust to your own mother, who knows better how

to manage a family than he does, and you get the baby many an hour's rest when it would be nearly screaming itself into fits with pain in its little gums. Why you actually save him money by it, for you get a deal of work done that must stand still or be done by somebody else, if you had baby in your arms instead of lying peaceably in his cradle, as he has done this morning ever since breakfast."

The girl's conscience was silenced, and from that time she never hesitated to use the means pointed out by her mother for replenishing the bottle.

As may be well imagined, the effect upon Mary Jones's mind was most injurious. At first she had turned with horror from the very thought of deceiving her master, disobeying his commands, or applying any portion of the money intrusted to her care, to the purchase of the forbidden article. The girl had been one of good Mrs. Raynor's Sunday scholars, and though thoughtless and careless enough in most things, she had not been insensible to the careful teaching bestowed upon her by the clergyman's wife. The seed, though fallen on stony ground, had yet sprung up, and retained something of life for a time. At the school Mary had been taught to call sin by its proper name, and, when the first temptation to deceit came from her own mother, we know that conscience whispered that in the sight of God her compliance would render her dishonest, both in word and deed.

But, alas! The good seed had fallen where there was "not much earth," and in time of temptation it was proved to have no root, but withered away.

## CHAPTER V.

### ANOTHER STEP IN THE WRONG DIRECTION—ELLEN RICHARDS COMES HOME.

It was soon observed by neighbours and friends, but most of all by the anxious father, that George Robertson's baby was not looking nearly so healthy as it did. It had seemed but a sickly little thing at first, but by degrees the small arms had become round, and the pale cheeks rosy, while its baby voice gained strength, and it could either cry or crow, as the case might be, most lustily. Things were now again altered, and all for the worse. Willie's limbs were flabby, his cheeks of a pasty hue, his sturdy cry had changed into a fretful whine, and as his father said, "poor baby seemed to have no life in him, and his dear eyes were as heavy as lead."

Robertson's own words had the effect of rousing suspicion in his mind, and turning sharply round to Mary, he said, "What have you been giving to Willie?"

"He has just had some sago and milk," was the innocent reply.

"But what else?"

"Nothing, sir, since dinner time, and you saw me feed him then. He has been asleep most of the afternoon."

"It seems to me that he sleeps more than is natural or good for him," was the sharp reply.

"Law, sir, he was awake for hours in the night, and neither would sleep himself nor let me. I'm sure

I got up almost as tired as when I went to bed," returned the girl in an injured tone.

Robertson knew this to be true. The sound of the little creature's voice had waked him in the night, and brought to his mind sorrowful thoughts of that tender mother, taken away before the poor infant had experienced her care. Still his suspicions were aroused. He knew too well what was the custom of nearly all the poorer mothers in Birkdale, and dreaded lest his child was being slowly poisoned through the medium of some soothing syrup or other. He accordingly turned quickly upon Mary and said, "I know well enough what *food* the child has had, but I want to know whether you have been giving Willie sleeping stuff of any kind."

It is too true that "one lie requires many more to hide it." Six months ago Mary Jones would have shuddered at the idea of telling a direct falsehood, but now she did not hesitate a moment. She had habituated herself to acts of deceit, and the next step was a very easy one. The very dread of discovery nerved her to look boldly at her master and deny indignantly that she had ever given the child a drop of anything to make him sleep. Gathering courage from the appearance of hesitation which her words produced on her master's countenance, the girl became the attacking party, and asked if it were likely she should lie awake all the night or nearly, and then have baby sleeping in the day time—just to hinder him from resting at the proper hour. Beside, "had master ever found her out in a story since into the house she came?"

There was a show of reason in what Mary said. As a rule he had found her obedient, attentive to, and fond of his children, especially her baby charge, and he could not say that she had ever told him a falsehood. Even Mrs. Raynor, who considered her too young and thoughtless for her responsible situation, believed her to be truthful.

Silenced, though not altogether convinced, Robert-



son bade the girl go about her work and leave Willie with him. He also resolved not to lose sight of the child for a moment during the remainder of the evening, and to take charge of him through the night. He was the more confirmed in this determination when he observed that Mary's indignation did not subside. She went about the house grumbling at intervals, and displaying a sort of sullen independence of manner, quite unlike her usual conduct. Repeated, though muttered assertions of innocence, and an expressed intention to "let mother know how she was suspected," rather increased than allayed her master's doubts, to which the sight of Willie's heavy eyelids and inanimate countenance gave increased force. However, for that night he was satisfied by his constant watchfulness, that nothing but proper food was taken by Willie, and as the little creature slept well he was inclined when morning came to blame himself for over-hastiness.

As Mary did not think it expedient to carry her assumed indignation any further, but appeared in the morning with a cheerful face and submissive manner, her master took no further notice of her mutterings of the preceding evening, but simply renewed his injunctions that she should give nothing but its regular food to the baby, and once more intrusted Willie to her care.

Mary had an opportunity of "telling her mother," as she had threatened, during the forenoon. Mrs. Jones dropped in unexpectedly, to arrange about putting off the next wash from Monday to Tuesday, in order to accommodate another employer, and then heard what had happened. "O mother," said Mary, "I was so frightened, master was so sharp, and he fixed his eyes on me as if he would look me through. He would have found me out if I hadn't told a—"

"Hush," interposed Mrs. Jones, not liking to hear the result of her counsels, after having so often protested against the direct mode of falsehood that Mary

had practised to screen the *acted lie* of many weeks past. "Who would have thought Mr. Robertson would turn round upon you like that? I'm afraid you must have given the child too much, and you know, Mary," she added severely, "how I've cautioned you against overdoing it."

"Mother, you know as well as I do," retorted Mary, "that after the first few times, half a spoonful would do no good. You gave our little Charley three times as much before he was as old as master's baby."

"But there's a deal of difference in children. Charley was as strong at a month old, as some are at six. How much had you given the baby to make him sleep so long?"

"Only a spoonful out of that fresh bottleful that came yesterday. The night before I had none at all, and that made him so cross. Master watched me all the night, till bed time, and it was lucky Willie slept well, though *he* took him and saw that he had nothing."

"Be careful, my girl. The stuff will never hurt the child if you don't use too much, and mind you don't give more than a spoonful, under any circumstances."

The woman rose to go, and was already at the door, but she turned back to ask where Mary kept the little bottle.

"Always locked up in my own box, and I never leave the key in for a minute."

"That's right. Good bye, my girl. Take care of yourself, and mind what I've told you."

"Yes, I'll mind," replied Mary. But at the same moment the thought came, "I'm afraid I have minded mother rather too much about one thing. I can't help wishing I had never used that stuff. It had nearly brought me into trouble last night."

Had it not done so? Surely what leads us into temptation, against which our Lord taught us to pray, what tempts us to deceit and lying, must be trouble

enough to be brought into, even though our sin may bring no immediate punishment, but remain concealed from man's knowledge.

Mary felt it a trouble after all. No person had been more careful to impress upon her scholars the duty of obedience to parents than Mrs. Raynor. But Mary knew full well that there is a limit to the command, "Children, obey your parents." This obedience must be "in the Lord; for this is right," and that there should in no case be any hesitation in disobeying a command or disregarding advice which was in itself exactly contrary to the law of God. Somehow that brief text, too, on the wall over the kitchen fire-place, made her feel extremely uncomfortable, and though she purposely forbore to raise her eyes in that direction, the words, "Thou God seest me," were present to her mind wherever she went.

Truly "the way of transgressors is hard."

In the meanwhile Mrs. Jones was hurrying homewards, when she caught sight of a familiar face, which she little expected to see in Birkdale. It was that of a modest-looking young woman, apparently about twenty-seven years of age, dressed with great neatness, and without any of the cheap showy finery in which too many respectable young servants think it necessary to attire themselves. She was rather tall, and would have been handsome, for her features were good and regular, her dark hair abundant and glossy, and her clear blue eyes beamed kindly, but there were traces of the small-pox in sufficient number to take away the smoothness of the skin, and in some degree injure the complexion. In spite of these, however, the impression left upon an unprejudiced beholder by the young woman's face must have been pleasing, less on account of the features than of the truth and honesty stamped there. At that moment, however, there was much of sadness in addition, and Mrs. Jones, as she addressed the young woman, showed herself sensible of the fact.

"Why, Ellen Richards!" she exclaimed; "What has brought you to Birkdale? I thought you weren't coming home till the year's end, as you live such a long way off now-a-days. You look as if something was the matter."

"I am sorry to say my mother is very ill again," replied Ellen, "otherwise I should not be here now."

"Dear me! When was she taken? What is her complaint? How strange! I never heard a word about it," was the rapid answer.

"Two days since, with a fit, and she has never been sensible since," replied Ellen with quivering lips, for the shock of finding her mother, whom she left in good health, unable even to recognise her, was a severe one for the daughter to bear. "Father borrowed a horse and rode to the railway station, to telegraph for me, so I got leave and came off directly."

"When did you get here, Ellen?"

"Last night at eight o'clock."

Mrs. Jones was pouring forth a string of questions, but Ellen said gently that she must not stay another moment, as she had to meet the Wolftown carrier, who was to bring her mother's medicine as far as the cross roads, and immediately hurried away.

There was no doctor resident in Birkdale, so its inhabitants were always obliged to send to the next market town, a distance of four miles. But the farmers were kind in lending a horse, and the cottagers neighbourly, so that, whether wanted for rich or poor, both steed and messenger were always to be found when it was needful to send a speedy summons for one of the Wolftown doctors.

When Mrs. Jones arrived at her own cottage she found that a somewhat serious accident had occurred during her absence, and Ellen Richards was driven out of her mind by what concerned herself more nearly. It was no uncommon thing to hear the cries of the little ones, very small housekeepers, who did not always agree while the mother's back was turned.

But on this occasion her ear detected the difference between the childish squabble, which her presence was ever sufficient to check in a moment, and shrieks of pain that jarred terribly and made her hasten forward with quickened steps and palpitating heart.

Within the cottage was a scene of confusion. The kitchen was full of dust and steam, the large kettle lying bottom upwards on the extinguished fire, the lid jerked off and within the fender, while a stream of water mingled with ashes from the hearth was flowing across the floor. The scene told its own tale, but unfortunately the consequences did not end here. Two of the little children, one three the other four years of age, were badly scalded, not so as to endanger life, but enough to cause great suffering, and to find their mother employment in nursing for some time to come.

The elder children began to explain and to try to clear themselves from blame. Patty told how the kettle was just boiling, and she was going to take it off, when little Jem—the eldest of the scalded ones—poked a stick between the bars, which took the prop from under it, and brought the contents streaming down upon his own legs and those of Sally, who was standing near.

Patty rightly judged that nobody could be whipped under such circumstances; for, indeed, the cause of the mischief was himself the chief sufferer by it, and therefore sufficiently punished already. But the mother was too much troubled at the cries of pain coming from those two little throats to think of anything but obtaining relief. "Put baby down, Patty," she said, "never mind him crying, and look if anybody is coming that will help me."

The girl did as she was told; but for a minute or two she looked in vain. Then she descried a young woman coming onwards with rapid steps. It was Ellen Richards returning with the medicine for her mother. Mrs. Jones, having twice stopped on the way

## ELLEN RICHARDS COMES HOME.

to speak about her neighbour's sudden illness, and to express her wonder that she had only just heard of it, beside calling for tea and sugar at the single shop in Birkdale, had been much longer in reaching home than was necessary. Thus Ellen had performed her errand, though the distance she had to go was considerable, and was returning, when Patty Jones came running out of the cottage, and begged her to go in *just for a moment*. The child's face was expressive of the utmost dismay, and she seconded her appeal by saying that "Jem and little Sally had got scalded."

Ellen scarcely knew what to do. She did not like to refuse help, yet she was most anxious to get home to her mother, whose state, if not threatening immediate danger, was very critical. The medicine would not be wanted before night, as there was a dose remaining in the former bottle, and she knew that kind hands were there, and a willing watcher supplying her place by her mother's sick bed. Ellen therefore hesitated not, but followed the child into the cottage.

"O Ellen, is it you?" cried the distracted mother. "I am in such trouble. You see what has happened while I was out. Can you stay just a few minutes and help me to undress these poor children? Do you know what will do them good?"

Ellen turned pale as she saw the poor little sufferers, but their evident pain made her all the more anxious to be of use. Very tenderly she assisted in removing their clothes and laying them in bed, their mother the while weeping bitterly, and asking what she must put on the scalded places.

"Lanseed oil and lime-water in equal parts is an excellent thing; but I dare say you have not that at hand. The next best that I know of to use in a hurry is cold flour, and that you are sure to have. Patty, you can get me some flour; quick, there's a good girl, and, Mrs. Jones, we shall want plenty of clean rags."

Patty ran off for the flour, Mrs. Jones opened a

drawer, and while turning over its contents in search of rag, Ellen caught sight of several large pieces of white cotton wadding. "Can you let me have that?" she said. "It will be softer than rag even."

"O dear! I am glad. I'm rather scarce of rag fit for the purpose, and this is the inner lining of an old cloak that Mrs. Martin gave me to cut down for Patty. It is quite clean."

Patty having returned with a bowl of flour, some part of which she scattered by the way in her haste, yet without being scolded by her mother, Ellen covered the wadding thickly with it, and gently swathed the little inflamed legs therein. On one or two broken places in the skin she placed a small plaster of pure lard to prevent the flour from sticking. The poor children experienced much relief from this simple application, and Mrs. Jones knew not how to thank Ellen sufficiently for her timely aid. Before the work was so far completed, however, Mrs. Jones observed the medicine lying on the table, and offered to send Patty with it. "She's very quick at going an errand, and will deliver the medicine as soon as you would, Ellen."

"Thank you, Mrs. Jones, the medicine is not wanted directly. If it had been I must have gone home at once, for I do not like trusting physic in such young hands. I am very glad indeed that I have been able to render you any assistance, and I hope the dear children will soon be better."

Her task being thus far completed, Ellen rose, put on her bonnet and shawl, and having expressed her regret that she could not stay longer and help Mrs. Jones to put her house in order, she took her departure followed by the thanks and blessings of the mother. When she reached home, she found her own parent in the same state as she had left her, and thankful that at least her delay on the road had done no harm, she resumed her post by the sick bed.

As Mrs. Jones went about her work of rekindling

the fire, and setting things to rights, she felt by no means comfortable. She could not help blaming herself as the indirect cause of the accident; for, had she not stayed gossiping, first with her daughter Mary, and then with sundry acquaintances on the road, she might have been at home an hour before it occurred. Had she been present she knew well that little Jem would never have dared to poke the fire with a stick; but how could little Patty, a girl of ten, manage four children, and one of them a baby? "If it had happened while I was out working to help get them bread, I shouldn't have blamed myself so much," thought she, "but I might ha' been at home."

Here the sound of crying from the children's bedroom told that though poor Jem and Sally had obtained some relief they were yet in pain, and brought tears to the mother's eyes also. She took down that oft-used bottle of "Quietness" from the shelf; and saying "It will be a kindness to get them to sleep if I can," went and administered a sufficient quantity to produce the desired effect in a short time. The very act of using this sleeping syrup, common as it was, reminded her of the dilemma into which she had been the means of bringing her eldest daughter, and of the wilful falsehood which the girl had told to escape detection. Altogether, her thoughts were of no pleasant character.

Mother and daughter were alike realizing by their own experience the truth of the text already quoted, "The way of transgressors is hard," though the words were present to the mind of neither.



## CHAPTER VI

### COTTAGE PLANS.

THE skill of the doctor, the careful nursing of Ellen, the anxious affection of the husband, who, possessing but little, would yet have sacrificed all to save his wife, proved unavailing as regarded Mrs. Richards. She lived three weeks after her daughter's arrival at Birkdale, and to the great joy of Ellen and her father was restored to the possession of her senses, which she retained to the last.

"I know I shall never be well or strong again," she said to her daughter. "Your poor father will miss me sadly, but I leave him to you, Ellen. You have been a very dutiful daughter, and if ever a mother's prayers for a child were blessed and answered mine have been. When I'm gone, you mustn't leave your father. Stay with him, and be the best comfort he can have. I know Mrs. Raynor would say you ought to stay, and your mistress, that now is, couldn't ask you to go back."

Ellen, with tearful eyes, made the required promise, assuring her mother that should it indeed please God to take her from them, she would do all in her power for her father's comfort. Still she hoped the wife might be spared.

The sick woman shook her head. "The end is not far off, Ellen," she said. "I believe I need not have asked you to make such a promise. Your own affection for him and me would have been enough."

Mrs. Richards judged her daughter rightly. While naturally wishing for her mother's recovery, Ellen

had always felt her fears outweigh her hopes whenever she looked at the wan face and gradually failing strength of the invalid. Before Mrs. Richards spoke she had decided what would be the right course to take, and resolved that in her father's humble home must lie her work for the future. Her mistress, though extremely unwilling to part with so valuable a servant, at once released her from her engagement, and left Ellen at liberty to devote herself to promoting her father's comfort, when her mother no longer required her care.

The change was a great one for Ellen Richards. She had not been a regular inmate of her father's little cottage since, as a girl of thirteen, she went out to her first place. She could look back upon that time, when proud to think of earning something, she used to run home with her wages—ninepence paid weekly,—and place them in her mother's hands, to be expended as her parents thought best. She could recall her gradual advance, owing principally to the wise and prudent counsels of that good mother, who—if Ellen complained of a sharp mistress, or thought herself hardly dealt with in having to do over again a carelessly performed piece of work—would point out the benefit to herself in having a teacher that insisted on work being well done.

"That mistress is no true friend to her servants," Mrs. Richards used to say, "who lets them slip their work and never complains so long as it is got through in any fashion. But, by teaching you to do it thoroughly, and insisting upon obedience, she benefits you as much as herself. Nay, more, for she is getting you into habits which will be of service to you as long as you live, and that make you every year more valuable as a servant, while the good to herself only lasts so long as you stay with her. As to a sharp word, my girl, the Bible will give you a better receipt to cure that than any words of mine, 'A soft answer turneth away wrath.' Never give a saucy answer,

Ellen, for no mistress will bear it, but if you feel—and I know our tempers get the better of us only too often—that you can't master yourself so far as to speak gently and respectfully, why just hold your tongue altogether. Be careful, too, that you don't let sulky looks tell the tale which you daren't speak, for I've seen people more put out of temper with an answer given in that way than even with words."

"I often try hard to follow your advice, mother," the girl would say, "but——"

"You fail as often as not. That only shows that, however willing the spirit, the flesh is weak. If such a man as St. Paul found this out, you needn't wonder at its being your experience. But you know who can give strength, and who has said, 'Call upon Me in the day of trouble: I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify Me.' Such things as you have told me about are your troubles; so fulfil the command, and doubt not that God will fulfil His promise. And oh, Ellen, if your prayer is answered, don't forget to glorify God for giving you the victory over your own evil nature. Let Him have all the praise."

As Ellen recalled to mind the words of her mother, and thought of the influence they had exerted over her life, it seemed as though the dead had yet the power to speak to her heart by means of memory, which made the past ever present to her imagination. It was undoubtedly a trial to give up a situation where she had high wages, and was surrounded by comforts far above those which her father's humble means could afford. He was but a labouring man. Work was sometimes scarce, and rigid economy was needed to make ends meet. Wives, too, had to do their part towards bread-winning, and during hay-time and harvest to go forth into the fields to labour.

From this out-door work alone Ellen shrank. Cheerfully and willingly would she do her part to-

wards the support of the cottage home, but it must not be by field-work. Harvest was near at hand, and her father had hinted that he should need some one to take that place which her mother had been accustomed to fill.

"I'm afraid, Ellen," he said, "you've been so accustomed to what one may call a lady's life that you would take badly to it. But it will make a deal of difference in my earnings, to say nothing of the gleanings afterwards, if you cannot go out."

Ellen coloured deeply. "I'm very anxious to help you, father, but I'm afraid I should be a poor hand at harvest work. Beside——"

"You wouldn't like it, Ellen, I know, and I feel as if I oughtn't to ask you, especially as you've given up such a good place just for your old father's sake, and to make him comfortable. But after all, my girl, I look upon it that there's no disgrace in going into the harvest-field. There was Ruth, you remember, whose story one reads in the Bible, wasn't ashamed to go out gleaning, and she was grandmother to King David."

"I have thought of another way, father, in which I believe I shall be able to help you better. Our little cottage will not take up all my time, and I should ill like to spend the rest in idleness. I have been long used to making children's dresses and such work, and could manage gowns for country folks very well. This work would pay me better and be more regular than any out-door labour, and be less trying to one who has not been used to exposure to all sorts of weather. Then I have still a bit of money in the Savings' Bank——"

"And it must stop there. Your poor mother taught you from first going out to service to put by something, and lately you have saved more, beside helping us. But you know, Ellen, you drew out enough to pay the rest of the doctor's bill and your own mourning, for what we had from the club would

not do all, and I should be very sorry for you to draw out any more."

"Well, but listen, father. Half of what is in the bank would buy a cow, and I could sell every drop of the milk new, so there would be no churning. My dairy would be hardly any trouble."

"You might sell the milk fast enough, and twice as much; for it is no easy thing to get any. Farmers' wives will sell nothing but skimmed milk, and almost make a favour of doing that, they have so many ways of using it. But, my girl, the cow would want feeding, and I reckon our garden would hardly furnish grass and hay for her."

He glanced as he spoke towards the tiny grass plot, containing about three square yards, with the little flower beds round it and the bit of kitchen garden beyond with its few gooseberry and currant bushes, and its crop of vegetables, very useful to them, but not too great for their wants, especially as the pig consumed all the remnants and meal besides.

"But couldn't you get a field, father? I should like you to make the trial, for cow-keeping pays well."

"It's not easy to get a bit of land, Ellen. Wherever there is a field likely to be at liberty there are so many people for it, and ten to one but a farmer gets it put to his farm. However, a thought has crossed my mind, and I'll try what I can do."

This thought whatever it was led James Richards to call at the carpenter's house. Robertson was from home, but on his return Mary Jones told her master of his visit. "Did Richards leave any message, Mary?" he asked.

"No, sir. He only said he wanted to have a word with you, and would call again."

"I think I'll just step down to his house and see what he wants, for I shall be out all day to-morrow, and it may be something of consequence."

Robertson resumed his hat and went out, rather

wondering what Richards could want. The two men had met several times of late, indeed the carpenter, who was also the one undertaker in Birkdale, had acted as such at the funeral of Mrs. Richards. James had duly paid his bill two days before, when he received the club money, so that his call could have no connexion with that matter.

To say the truth, Robertson was not sorry to have an excuse for calling at his neighbour's cottage, though he was tired with a long day's work, and the little dwelling lay at the other extremity of the village. He had seen Ellen Richards at and before her mother's funeral, and felt a great wish to meet her again. Some consciousness that this desire was the fruit of a feeling which he should scarcely like others to guess at had prevented his asking whether Ellen Richards was going to remain with her father or not. By calling at the house he would no doubt have a chance of finding this out also.

Ten minutes after Robertson left his own dwelling the young housekeeper had to answer a loud rap at the door. On opening it she saw farmer Martin on horseback. "Where's your master, my girl? Is he within?" asked Mr. Martin.

"No, sir. He's just gone down to James Richards's. I dare say he'll not be long, for I know he has to be up very early in the morning. James came when master was out, so he stepped down to see what was wanted."

"I can't wait, but you can tell him I've been, and should be glad for him to call at the farm as soon as he has half an hour to spare. How's baby? Maggie and Fred at Aunt Pierson's? I saw them there a while ago."

Scarcely giving Mary time to answer that baby's teeth were troubling him, farmer Martin turned his horse round and trotted briskly away.

"A deal he cares whether you are well or ill, you darling," said the girl, as she pressed the child to her

bosom and covered its pale face with kisses. Despite her injudicious treatment, and the wicked deception by which it was continued, the girl loved her helpless charge, and could not bear that any person should speak slightly of it.

When farmer Martin reached home his wife's first inquiry was, "Did you find George at home?"

"No, he had gone to James Richards's."

"To James Richards's?" echoed his spouse, and Mrs. Pierson likewise, the latter having dropped in to have a little sisterly chat about the butter, eggs, poultry, cows, and the market value of the same.

"Yes, why shouldn't he? I dare say Richards had dropped in to pay his bill, and——"

"That was paid the other night," interrupted Mrs. Martin.

"At any rate, James called and, like me, found Robertson out, so when George came in he went to see what was wanted."

"A good excuse no doubt," was the significant answer.

"Excuse for what?" returned her husband, opening his eyes wide in wonder.

"Humph! It doesn't matter. But I can see through it, and so can you, sister Pierson."

Mrs. Pierson nodded, with a look of superior wisdom, and added further, "that none were so blind as those who wouldn't see." She wished all might end well, &c. &c.

The farmer went out laughing. "I don't know what you women folks are driving at," he said, as his hand was on the latch; "but I shall leave you to yourselves. I've enough to do to mind my own business without bothering myself with your fancies."

"Fancies!" groaned his wife. "They'll prove no fancies in the end. However, we've done our best to keep George from temptation; but it seems as if all our trying would only be the means of putting off the evil day."

"Maybe he has only gone to James Richards on some joinering business. He goes to many a house in Birkdale where there are nicer girls than Ellen, I mean to look at." Aunt Pierson had a conscience, and without belying it could not say that she knew a worthier young woman than the one of whom her sister was so jealous. "And," she added, "he has never taken notice of any since poor Margaret died."

"It isn't looks that would take George," returned Mrs. Martin, "unless there was something else; and Ellen Richards is so soft-spoken and demure, that she'd be far more dangerous than any of those showy girls, such as Parker's daughters at the shop."

"Well, Hannah, as you say, we've done our best," replied Mrs. Pierson; "and Mary Jones has managed better than could have been expected. Have you seen her mother lately?"

"Yes, often, poor thing! She has her hands tied with those children yet, though they are mending fast of the scalds. I believe there are three out of the family ill of measles. How she pulls through at all I don't know."

"It's to be hoped Mary doesn't take George's baby there," said Mrs. Pierson. "It looks so pale and delicate, that I think if it were to catch any complaint now it would hardly get over it."

"She does not, I know. As mine have all had measles, I'm not afraid to run in now and then, for the cottage is so near, only just across the field. As to George's baby, it may last for a while, but I have never thought it would live long."

"It got on wonderfully at first, but somehow, Hannah, I have noticed a difference in its looks ever since we left off going," said Mrs. Pierson, with an air of anxiety.

"Nonsense, Jane," was the sharp rejoinder. "If I were you, I wouldn't be so ready to fancy myself to blame. It was always ailing."



Mrs. Pierson thought that her sister's fancies had sometimes less foundation than her own. She however said no more on that subject, but changed the conversation to the amount of butter yielded by the new cow, and the consequent weekly profit to herself, which would permit her to purchase a handsome silk dress, with corresponding bonnet and cloak, for winter wear. In the discussion of this interesting matter we will leave the sisters for the present.

## CHAPTER VII.

### CROSS-PURPOSES AND GOSSIPING TONGUES.

WHEN the carpenter reached James Richards's door it was opened by Ellen herself. "Do walk in, Mr. Robertson," she said. "Father is just giving the pig his supper, and will be in directly; or I will tell him you are here," she added, as soon as the visitor was seated.

"No occasion, thank you," said Robertson, "I can see him coming."

Ellen glanced through the little side window, and observing that her father was approaching the door, quietly sat down and resumed her work.

Somehow, as he looked at her, Robertson was irresistibly reminded of his own beloved Margaret. Not that their features were alike, for his late wife far excelled Ellen Richards in personal attractions, but there was the same feminine sweetness, the same simplicity in dress combined with beautiful neatness, the same *honest* and *true* expression of countenance. George observed how plain was the black dress which Ellen wore, and of what homely materials it was composed, and yet he could not help contrasting it with the mourning attire of the three Misses Parker at the shop, whom he had met on his way thither. They were handsome girls compared with Ellen; their clothes were costly with crape, and made as smart as mourning could be by the addition of trimmings sparkling with bugles and black beads; yet Ellen looked both better and more becomingly dressed than they.

George had often observed the same sort of difference between his late wife and her sisters. His means would not permit Margaret to purchase costly clothes, whilst the numerous perquisites of the farmer's wives enabled them to indulge in gay ribbons, rainbow-hued silks, and large brooches; yet her air of refinement, and the quiet good taste she displayed in the choice of her few gowns, always made her look the best-dressed person of the three. Indeed, the sisters themselves acknowledged this. It was a common remark of both, "It is no matter what our Margaret puts on, she always looks well." Yet, while acknowledging this, neither could resist the enticement of brilliant colours, as shown in staring plaids and stripes when recommended as fashionable by a bland-spoken shopman.

Robertson had just time for these thoughts before the master of the cottage entered. "Eh, Mr. Robertson," said James, "you are soon after me. I suppose your servant told you I had called, wanting to speak with you?"

"Yes. I thought it might be something of consequence, so as I was going to be working at a distance to-morrow, I would step down and see."

"It is of consequence to me, but not to you," was the reply, "but I know you'll excuse me naming it. You see, Ellen has given up her place, and is going to stay and keep house for her old father. Beside, she's anxious to help me as her poor mother did, but she hasn't been used to harvest or out-door work of any kind, and she hardly likes to begin it."

"It would be a great pity she should," replied George, with a degree of earnestness which half surprised himself, "for," he continued, "anybody needs to be trained early to stand all weathers, as our cottagers' wives about here do."

"That was what Ellen said. And if she began it, and her health suffered— I've sometimes thought," he added, sighing, "that it did her poor mother no

good, though she had been used to it all her life. But I mustn't get talking of that. Ellen is going to do a bit of dressmaking, and she was thinking she should like to keep a cow, only it is such a hard matter to get a pasture for it."

George saw what was coming, and determined to do his old neighbour and Ellen a kindness without being solicited; so, without allowing him to explain the matter further, he said, "I think, James, I can help you out of that difficulty. You know I have a little land belonging to my house, and it is as near to your place as to mine. When poor Margaret was alive we always had one cow, sometimes a couple, but since her death I have been obliged to give up my little dairy, for Mary Jones is too young to manage it, and has plenty to do without. I can therefore pasture your cow if you get one, and I have a bit of excellent hay to sell for winter eating. As to price, you'll find my terms no higher than my neighbours, so I've no doubt we shall agree both for grass and hay."

Ellen gave utterance to a joyful exclamation, and her hitherto pensive face was lighted up with gladness caused by the carpenter's words.

"There, Ellen, my girl, you're set up now, I reckon," said her father, no less delighted. Then turning again to his visitor, "This was the very thing I came to ask you about, Mr. Robertson, but I hardly expected to get it. However, I'm very much obliged to you, and so, I'm sure, is my girl there."

Ellen modestly joined her thanks with those of her father, which, however, George disclaimed any right to, as he said, "It was just a bargain he must make with somebody. The grazing and the haystack were both for sale, since he had no animal bigger than a cat about his place, and therefore could not consume them at home."

A little further conversation sufficed to settle terms,

and Robertson was consulted as to the qualities of a certain cow that might be purchased. James, in the openness of his heart, told him of Ellen's little fund, laid by, bit by bit, during many years, and now destined to pay for cow and fodder. Mention was also made of winter accommodation for the beast, and James took his guest down to the end of the cottage garden, where stood a shed, which, with a little repairing, could be made available. It wanted only a few old boards, and the primitive style of plastering with mud and coating with whitewash, so common in our agricultural villages, and which every working man can do.

George asked if he had any suitable boards.

"No, Mr. Robertson; but I was thinking they are in your line, and maybe you could sell me a little lot that would answer my purpose and not be too expensive."

"I have a little lot that would exactly do," returned George, "and you shan't find them very expensive either, for I'll throw them in at the bargain we made indoors; so now I think there is nothing else to settle, and I must be going, for I have my work set for to-morrow, and shall have to be stirring before daylight."

"I mustn't ask you to go in again in that case," returned Richards, "but I'm more obliged to you than I can say. I should have thought myself very lucky to get what I wanted by seeking it as a favour, and here you make it a double one by bringing it to me."

"Don't say another word. I'm so glad it lies in my power to accommodate you, James. Now I'll just bid your daughter good night, and be off home."

Ellen came to the door as she heard their voices at the threshold, and Robertson felt doubly glad as he saw her face still beaming with the pleasure which he had been enabled to give, really without any cost to himself. The remembrance of the clean cottage, the

homely, affectionate father, and, above all, of the gentle-voiced young woman who was so dutiful a daughter, did not vanish with the sight of them.

"She is more like my poor Margaret than any one I have seen," he said to himself, and sighed as he thought of the vacant place which his good wife used to fill.

It was late on the following evening when the carpenter reached home, and when he did so, was told that farmer Martin had again been inquiring for him.

"I dare say it is about repairing those fences," he remarked. "Martin has mentioned them once or twice, but said, as I was rather busy, it would not matter for a week or two. However, I've told a man to go up to the farm in the morning, and shall be there in the course of the day myself. At any rate it is quite too late to call at Martin's to-night, whether he wants me about the fence or something else. Have Margaret and Freddy come from their Aunt Pierson's, Mary?" he further inquired, as he saw no traces of his elder children.

"No, sir. I think they are to stay till Saturday. They looked in to-night, as they were leaving school, to see if you were at home."

George scarcely felt satisfied that they should be so much away. "Their aunts' houses," he thought, "are more of home to them than mine; and yet, poor things, it is perhaps better, for Mary is very young to have the guiding of them, and I am so much away on week-days. Eh, dear! Nobody knows the loss of a wife like mine unless he has experienced it."

The father turned next to the cradle to look at little Willie. It was always a pleasure and comfort to him to take his baby in his arms and nurse it for a while before retiring to rest; but it was sleeping soundly, and he would not disturb the little creature. He noticed, however, with pain that there was no healthy colour tinging its cheeks, and that the small

hand and arm which lay outside the coverlid seemed smaller even than when he last noticed them.

About the same time as Robertson stood gazing at his infant the eyes of Mrs. Martin were turned towards the clock. Her husband was nodding in his three-cornered, leather-seated chair, for farmers keep early hours, and it was past their usual bedtime. The wife approached, and gave her drowsy spouse a not very gentle shake. "Come," said she, "it's of no use sitting up any longer; we shall have nobody to-night."

"I told you that before, Hannah," he replied, yawning and stretching himself. "We might as well have gone to bed an hour since, for it was never likely George would come up here so late, especially when he had had such a long day's work of it."

"Humph! He could go to James Richards last night directly he was sent for. It might have been a message from Birkdale Hall instead of from an old labouring man living in a thatched cottage, he was off in such a hurry to see what was wanted. And those that saw him go and come away, told me that he first went into the cottage, and was talking with prim Miss Ellen while the old man was in the garden; then there was an hour of it indoors after Richards came, and afterwards another talk in the garden."

"What of that, Hannah? It might be a sin for George Robertson to speak to an old neighbour, or even to go about his lawful business, if it leads him into the house of anybody you don't happen to like. Why you should set yourself against old Richards and his daughter so, I don't know. You've never had such a servant as Ellen before or since she left you, and the girl has always behaved well, and bears a good name."

"She's as proud and stuck-up as can be," was the reply. "What do you think of Miss being too fine a lady to help at harvest work? If the old man worked for either you or Pierson, though, she would have to come down to it, or he should quit."

"I'll be bound she'll do something as good, for the lass hasn't an idle bone in her skin," returned the farmer carelessly, "and it's hardly likely she would take to harvesting if she could help it. But how do you happen to know so much about Ellen's movements, Hannah?"

"Those told me that saw and heard for themselves."

"Then all I can say is that they might ha' been a deal better employed," said the blunt-spoken farmer; "and I dare say it was some gossiping, idle wife, who ought to ha' been looking after her bairns or mending her husband's stockings, instead of watching folk that were about their own honest business."

Farmer Martin having finished his speech took up the candle, and leaving his wife to digest it as best she could, and to follow at her leisure, marched upstairs to bed. The good dame stood for a few moments fairly speechless with indignation; then having seen to the fastenings of the doors, and arranged a little matter or two which must always be done the very last thing, she followed her husband, though, for once, without any inclination to renew the discussion about Ellen Richards.

It may seem surprising that Mrs. Jones could be the one to report the proceedings of the cottager, his daughter, and George Robertson to the farmer's wife, but she was the person from whom this minute information came. She had found it necessary to go to a house immediately opposite the cottage of James Richards, and as her husband was at home with the children, and her opportunities of indulging her love of gossip were now, owing to their illness, few and far between, she availed herself of the present one to the very utmost.

Not that Mrs. Jones had any malicious intention towards Ellen Richards. On the contrary, she remembered with gratitude the assistance rendered by the young woman when her children met with the



accident. But Mrs. Martin was the wife of her husband's employer, and Mrs. Jones was a gossiping body, who loved to talk, and was only too glad when she could interest a listener of so much importance. So when Mrs. Martin asked if Ellen Richards were going to stay at home, this single question sufficed to set the woman's tongue running. All Ellen's doings and plans, so far as they were known, were repeated to the farmer's wife. George Robertson's call at the cottage, of which Mrs. Jones had been an accidental witness, was mentioned, and a very little exaggeration turned the few moments which he had spent with Ellen before her father's entrance into an important meeting. It was rather, however, by leaving something untold, and allowing Mrs. Martin to guess how long Mr. Robertson was in Ellen's company, that the mischief was done.

"The words of a tale-bearer are as wounds," says the proverb; and as if to impress upon us in the strongest manner the need for keeping "the mouth with a bridle," the words are thrice repeated. "Where no wood is, there the fire goeth out: so where there is no tale-bearer, the strife ceaseth."

Before Mrs. Martin heard all this gossip she had felt more kindly towards Ellen Richards. She could not but sympathize with her at the time of her mother's seizure and subsequent death, for she knew Ellen to be a dutiful daughter, and one who would mourn much for the loss of a parent. But now the little milk of human kindness which had found its way into her heart during her neighbour's season of sorrow had turned to vinegar, the honey into gall. Ellen was "a proud, stuck-up thing, who thought herself too good for work which better brought-up folks were not ashamed of, and as artful as she was proud."

So much for Mrs. Martin's judgment and the effect of her prejudice against Ellen. We know how really guileless had been the girl's conduct; how anxiously

she desired to be of service to her father, and <sup>and</sup> at peace with her neighbours also.

But if Mrs. Martin felt indignant that George Robertson did not visit the farm as speedily as he had done the cottage, in order to find out what was required of him, how much more so was she when she discovered the bargain made between her brother-in-law and James Richards.

It happened that farmer Martin had an eye to the bit of land which Robertson held, and the little stack of well-got hay, which smelled like a perfect nosegay as he went into the carpenter's yard. He was himself rather short both of pasture and hay, or rather he had purchased more stock than his farm would feed, having been tempted to do so by the offer of sundry bargains. These would prove cheap ones, if he could only keep them a few weeks longer—dear, if he were obliged to sell them again immediately. But in making these purchases he had looked at Robertson's little holding as if included in his own farm, feeling sure that with his brother-in-law he should only need to ask and to have.

It was with the intention of mentioning the matter to Robertson that he twice called at the house, and, though he did not find the carpenter at home, he never dreamed that his chance was lost. On the contrary, he laughed at his wife's fidgetiness, as he called it, told her she never could rest if she got anything into her head, and said it was only a question of a day or two, and, in the meanwhile, the beasts were just as well in his own field. "There would be George's to fall back upon afterwards."

The man who came to the farm to repair the fences brought word that Robertson would be there also in the course of the morning, so farmer Martin decided that he would bring George in to have a mouthful of dinner with them, and settle about the field at once. Accordingly he mentioned it to his brother-in-law.

"I'm very sorry," said George. "You know

nothing would please me better than to accommodate you, but—"

"You don't mean to say you've let anybody else have it?" cried the farmer, dropping his knife and fork in the extremity of surprise and vexation.

"Well, yes, I have," returned George. "I hadn't the slightest idea you wanted it, or of course you should have been first served. You never named it in any way, though I saw you a couple of days since."

"Of course I didn't, but I bought a lot of cattle at Carrington Market, reckoning on your land, as I knew you had nothing to stock it with, and now they're like to prove a dear bargain to me. I called on my road home, and that was as soon as I could, wasn't it? but you were out. However, you'll let me have the hay?"

Robertson was fain to own that he had disposed of, or at any rate promised, both grass and hay. In order to soften the farmer's evident irritation, he mentioned poor James Richards's recent loss, the dutiful conduct of his daughter in staying at home and giving up an excellent situation in order to make him comfortable, as well as the purpose to which the young woman's savings were to be devoted. "It can't be helped now," he added, "for I never break my word or run off a bargain. I thought only of obliging a poor but honest man, and a worthy young woman, not of disobliging you. If you had spoken first, I should have been as glad to accommodate you."

This was reasonable enough, and Farmer Martin knew it. But the disappointment spoiled his appetite. The knife and fork rested on the plate as he had dropped it, and the remainder of the food went away untouched. He could only think of his probable loss, where he had hoped for gain, as he well knew that most of his neighbours were, like himself, fully stocked with cattle, and the field which had slipped

through his fingers was the only available pasture within a suitable distance. However unreasonably, he was angry with George, with himself, still more with poor James Richards for having gained by his loss.

The rest of the dinner passed off almost in silence, and the moment it was finished the farmer went out to give orders to his men, without a word to Robertson.

The carpenter was really sorry for his relative's disappointment, and said so to Mrs. Martin. If anything, he found her still more annoyed.

"You know best, George," she said, "and it isn't for me to complain, but seeing how scarce land is, and how people are after a bit directly, I should ha' thought you'd have offered yours to us. You might have been sure we should be glad of it, or Pierson would for that matter. I thought indeed you were just keeping it for us, and never dreamed of your going past your own kin with a kindness. I may say, we have not done so by you."

This aggrieved tone was harder for George to withstand than an angry one. He knew that Mrs. Martin had shown his wife much kindness and affection during her lifetime, and that, at the farm, his elder children had a home as often as he chose to let them accept it. "Hannah," he said, "if I had known, or even thought of the matter, your husband would not have had to name it; as it is, I can only tell you how very sorry I am that it is out of my power to accommodate him. As to your kindnesses, both to me and mine, I wish I could tell you how grateful I feel for them. You have taken a deal of trouble for us in one way and another. And while I think of it, I want to ask a favour; will you come down to my place and just look at little Willie? The child has not seemed himself for many weeks past. It may be his teeth, but he is pale and thin, and the flesh hangs quite loosely on his little limbs. You are an experienced mother, and would be able to give me an opinion about him."

Mrs. Martin was pleased at this mark of respect to her superior judgment, but not willing to show it. She was in a hard mood just then, and she gave a hard answer to George's entreaty.

"I don't think my going to see the child would do much good, George. I've always had my opinion about him, and though he seemed to pick up for a bit and look stronger, it gave *me* no confidence. Sister Jane and I have said one to another many a time, that we did not think you would rear Willie; he never looked like it from the very first."

Robertson's face expressed much emotion during this speech; but Mrs. Martin resolutely looked in a different direction while she spoke, and would not see, though she felt pretty conscious of the effect her words would have upon the father's mind. She could not, however, help hearing how his voice trembled as he replied,

"I should like to keep him if it pleased God to spare him, Hannah, and I would leave no means untried to give him strength if I knew what was best to do. You'll come to see him, Hannah, won't you?"

"O yes, George, I'll come, certainly. I hope I shall never be found unwilling to do anything that lies in *my* power to serve a relation. I can't leave home to-morrow, for Saturday is always a busy day, and we begin harvest on Monday; but I'll be sure to look in on Sunday, as I leave church in the afternoon."

"Do, and Mary will have a cup of tea ready for you; it will refresh you before your walk home."

This was too great an approach to make. Mrs. Martin was willing to do George a kindness by calling to see his ailing child, but not to accept any little attention in return, so she protested that she should not be able to stay more than a few minutes at the most. Trusting, however, that any little irritation the Martins might feel would have passed

away under the peaceful influences of the Lord's Day and the services of His house, George left the matter where it was, and went to superintend the repair of the fences. He did not see his brother-in-law again that day, for farmer Martin was so put out, as he expressed it, that he purposely kept out of Robertson's way. But, in the evening, Mrs. Martin found that her husband did not again trouble himself to take the part of James Richards and his daughter, when she condemned the pride of the one, or the too-yielding character of the other. On the contrary, the farmer, usually good-natured enough, had begun to look on his quiet, industrious neighbours, as artful, designing people, not because they had really changed or deserved such a character, but simply because they, with a natural desire to make the best of their little means, had unintentionally crossed his path, and caused him some inconvenience.

Thus does our selfishness interfere with and blind our sense of justice.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### A WELCOME VISITOR AT MRS. JONES'S.

MRS. MARTIN'S foreboding words with regard to her infant nephew made Robertson doubly anxious about the child, and he was hesitating whether to call in a doctor at once, or to wait until she had paid her visit, when an appearance of improvement in the little fellow decided him to do the latter. His ears were greeted for the first time that evening with the cry of "dad," the earliest attempt at "father" which generally comes from baby lips, and which Mary had been trying to teach little Willie to say when Robertson came home.

The delighted father took the child in his arms, and gave it as many kisses as might have sufficed for the mother's share too. Regardless of his own weariness, he played with Willie, and tossed him in his strong arms until the little creature was almost wild with delight.

"He looks better to-night, Mary," said Robertson. "His Aunt Martin has promised that she will call on her way from church on Sunday afternoon. I felt so uneasy that I wanted her opinion about him, but I think when she comes she will say I am soon frightened."

The carpenter had felt annoyed at the unreasonable irritation of his brother-in-law, and this feeling, mingled with anxiety about his own baby boy, had depressed and troubled him. But the sound of Willie's first word, the sight of the little face, coloured by the active exercise he had given him,

and the bursts of crowing and laughter which followed, chased away the weight from his mind. The child was evidently better than he thought him, and as to the cloud between himself and Martin, they had had little "chips" before, and this would pass off like the rest. Martin must see that it was unreasonable to be vexed.

Thus argued Robertson, and, despite the trifling vexations of the day, he went to bed with a lighter heart than usual and slept soundly. At five he rose and set out for a distant day's work. He would not return until the evening, and then he reckoned on seeing all his children, and spending with them the coming Sunday, the blessed day of rest, on which souls, hungering and thirsting after righteousness, hold festival, and feast on the spiritual food which is spread for them without scarceness. And the wearied bodies, too, worn with the toil of the past week, welcome the Lord's Day, and feel that even for the opportunity of temporal refreshment which it affords, the "Hallowed Day" is a gift that calls for continued thankfulness, and cannot be too highly esteemed.

Early on the Saturday afternoon, Ellen Richards had finished her work; the little cottage was a model of cleanliness, and some sewing which had been intrusted to her was ready to take home. A large pan of potatoes was on the fire; these were for the Sunday provision of the pig, and Ellen thought she would not change her dress until she had taken them off and put them ready for use. As usual, however, she looked neat and clean in her lilac-printed morning gown, so, while the potatoes were cooking, she determined to put on her bonnet and take home the two little frocks that she had been making.

"They may require a little alteration," thought Ellen, "so I will try them on, and if they do I can bring them back and make it."

The frocks were for the children of the very neighbour from whose window Mrs. Jones had been enabled



to note George Robertson's visit to the cottage of James Richards. No alteration was required, as it happened. The frocks fitted nicely, and were duly approved by the mother, who was also gratified by Ellen's moderate charge for the work and the neatness of the sewing.

In small country villages few things pass unnoticed, and nearly every inhabitant knows almost as much of his neighbour's affairs as of his own. Birkdale was no exception to this rule, and Ellen's neighbour, Agnes Reed, would fain have detained her to talk over village gossip, while she finished the household work in which she was engaged.

Ellen pleaded the potatoes, which would be ready by the time she could get back, but a remark made by Agnes as her hand was on the door-latch arrested her steps for a few moments.

"Have you heard how Jones's children are getting on to-day?" asked Agnes.

"No," replied Ellen. "The scalded ones were getting better fast, and those that had the measles were going on as well as could be expected the day before yesterday."

"I heard this morning that Jem had gone out too soon, and got cold. They think he'll die, and the eldest girl that's at home is down with measles now. Only Mary, that's servant at Robertson's, and one of the boys, had had the complaint before, so I expect it will go quite through the house. If ever a woman had her hands full, Mrs. Jones has just now, poor woman! One would like to go and give her a bit of help, but then none of my bairns have had measles, and I feel afraid on their account."

The thought instantly crossed Ellen's mind that, in a few minutes, she could be at liberty to render a little assistance to Mrs. Jones. She had had the measles years before, and there were no children under her father's roof who might be endangered by her coming from her neighbour's little ones to them.

So telling Agnes that she would go and spend a couple of hours in helping the tired mother, she bade her good-day, made her little home arrangements, and hastened on her kindly errand. She found Mrs. Jones, with tearful eyes and anxious countenance, nursing her baby, whose face was covered with the eruption, and at the same time watching little Jem, who was evidently unconscious of her presence, though he tossed to and fro on his bed and talked continually. The elder girl sat near the fire, wrapped in an old shawl, quite too ill to be of any use. Other fretful children claimed the mother's attention, which was necessarily given to those who most needed nursing, and the kitchen was all in disorder, and quite unlike what Mrs. Jones wished to see it.

"I am come to give you a little help if you will let me, Mrs. Jones," said Ellen. "I heard from Agnes Reed how you were fixed, and as I had done at home I thought I could perhaps be of some use."

"I think I never was so glad to see anybody in my life," was the hearty reply. "I'm completely overset; for I've had no settled rest night or day lately. Not a soul comes near me, and I know I can't expect those that have children to run into danger, and those that haven't, or can leave, are all working in the harvest field, as I should ha' been but for this."

She looked round as she spoke and sighed deeply. Ellen tried to say a few comforting words respecting the state of the children, and busied herself in arranging the disorderly kitchen and pacifying the little ones.

Mrs. Jones expressed her gratitude in the warmest terms, then said, "You see, Ellen, it's not one thing, but all coming together, as one may say, that upsets me so. First, there was those two getting scalded, and then the measles. But that's not all. If the poor things *should* be spared and get well again, my harvesting and gleanings will be lost for this year.

I could ha' been at work, the big girl could ha' minded the two least, and the others could ha' made bands in the field as long as harvest was going on. Then you know, if they're ever so young, they can help at gleaning, and so the least of 'em does its share. Last year the best of the gle'n't corn found us in bread for many a week, and some of it that we picked up after the rain that came towards the end of the time and was rather gritty did a deal towards feeding the pig. So you see, Ellen, it isn't only for to-day that one has to think; there's the after loss that nothing will make up. I may well be in trouble."

"We cannot tell," said Ellen gently. "No doubt this is a great trial, and there is nothing for it but to cast your care upon the Lord. His Word encourages us to do that, and there are so many promises to strengthen our weak faith. You know we are told that the hairs of our head are numbered, and again, 'Consider the ravens: for they neither sow nor reap; which neither have storehouse nor barn; and God feedeth them: how much more are ye better than the fowls?' Then there is the verse about the grass of the field being so clothed, and the command not to seek what we shall eat or what we shall drink, for our 'Father knoweth that we have need of these things.' Then there's the promise that if we seek first the kingdom of God, all these things shall be added unto us."

"I know, Ellen, for though I haven't much chance of reading, and I don't get so often to church as I should like, I learned many a chapter off by heart when I was a girl at the Sunday School."

"What a good thing that is," said Ellen. "It is the same with me; for many a time, when I have been going about my work, portions of Scripture, which I learned at the Sunday School, have come into my mind to strengthen and comfort me. Mrs. Raynor always took a great deal of pains to make us under-





stand what we learned, but I have only felt the full value of her teaching since I grew up. I suppose your young folks go to the Sunday School when they are well?"

"Why, yes; it gets them out of the way, and gives one a bit of peace on a Sunday."

"It does far more than that," said Ellen earnestly. "Think of the scriptural teaching which the children get there, and which is like good seed. It sometimes lies hidden for a while, but there's a deal of fruit from it in the end."

Mrs. Jones seemed to think that the best thing done was the relieving mothers of the care of their children for some hours on the Sunday, but as we know something of her opinions on religious subjects we need not be surprised at her valuing lightly the higher privileges held out to her children. She made one or two remarks to that effect, and seeing that Ellen did not agree with her, she continued, "You've always been under the clergyman's eye, you know, and of course you should know and think more about these things than I do. It's very well when you can, but I haven't much time. I've ten children, eight of 'em at home, nearly all those are ill, my hands are tied, and how we're to get bread for 'em all this winter I know not. You would be cast down like me if you were fixed so."

"I don't say that I shouldn't be a good deal cast down, Mrs. Jones. But I think that having all these trials and troubles would make me feel the greater need of looking to God's Word for comfort and strength. I should want to have the promises it contains always in my mind to help me on and encourage me. If I felt that I was weak, I should want to know where to look for strength, and if my bread were failing me or I was anxious about that for my children, I must look to the God who feeds the ravens, and who has given us an assurance that we are of more value in His sight than they are."

While Ellen was thus striving to give comfort, and lead her neighbour to seek it from a far higher source, her hands had not been idle. The kitchen was fast assuming an appearance of neatness and order. Cooling drink had been prepared for the sick children, and the kettle was on the fire as a first step towards the father's tea when he should come home.

"I don't know how to thank you," said Mrs. Jones. "I was completely set fast when you came. I'm sure, as night has come I've wondered how I've ever got the day over, and more how I should ever pull through the next."

"Well," said Ellen cheerfully, "I'm very glad to be of a little use. Having got through this day better than you expected, don't trouble about to-morrow. We are told to 'Take no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.'"

Ellen hastened her movements in order that she might be in time to get her father's tea ready, and, as she was putting the cups and saucers on Mrs. Jones's table, she asked where she should find the other articles.

"We haven't any tea or sugar in the house," said Mrs. Jones, "nor yet a penny left to buy any. I owe for a good few things at the shop, and I can't get more until we have paid a part, at least. There's another trouble. I expected to have managed *that* this harvest. I should like a cup of tea, too, for I've neither tasted bit nor sup since breakfast. My heart has been so full that I never thought of my empty stomach. But I must wait till he (meaning her husband) comes. There's some milk in the pantry, and I'll have some with a little boiling water in it."

"Wait a few minutes, and you shall have some tea," returned Ellen, and suiting the action to the word, she put on her bonnet, ran to the shop, and,

with a portion of the money earned by making the two frocks, purchased a couple of ounces of tea and half a pound of loaf sugar.

Mrs. Jones's face lighted up with pleasure when she saw these purchases. "I'll pay you back when he comes, Ellen, and thank you kindly. This cup of tea will make a new woman of me."

"Indeed, you shall not pay me back, Mrs. Jones, if you will accept the bit of tea and sugar."

"O Ellen! but what will your father say? You're not at the vicarage now, and working folks can't afford to give away by a shilling at a time."

"This was not bought with father's money. I earned it, and more, by my sewing at home. But if it had, I know he would never grudge it. Beside, we always get paid back, whatever we may do for a neighbour."

"You are lucky, Ellen. Does the vicar give it you again?"

Ellen laughed. "No," she said, "I don't mean that we really have it given us back directly, or even in money. But we have two promises of payment, and we dare trust to them, for He is faithful that has promised, and here are the words: 'He that hath pity upon the poor lendeth unto the Lord; and that which he hath given will He pay him again;' and, 'He that giveth unto the poor shall not lack.' We are all poor folks together, Mrs. Jones, and the more bound to help one another, because we understand what these trials are. If we do it according to our ability, just trusting in God's promises, no fear that He will forget us, or be unfaithful to His written Word."

Ellen's way of taking the promises of Scripture, as addressed to herself, presented a new idea to Mrs. Jones. At another time the words would probably have fallen on deaf ears, but now she was softened by the various troubles that surrounded her, and deeply impressed by the kindness of her neighbour. She could not help feeling that there must be something



in that religion which could move Ellen to act towards her as she did. It was not a thing of the lips only, but had its root in the heart, and brought forth fruit in the life. It was not a matter of mere profession, but of practice, and made Mrs. Jones very thoughtful as well as thankful, while she partook of the refreshment so nicely prepared, as well as provided, by the kind hands of Ellen Richards.

## CHAPTER IX.

### THE LITTLE BUD BLIGHTED.

It was still early in the afternoon as Mrs. Jones sat at her tea. She would fain have had Ellen share the meal with her, but she said, "Thank you, Mrs. Jones, I shall have mine with father when he comes home. I can stay with you long enough to get the children what they want, to clear these things away after you have done, and to set clean ones for your husband's tea. I suppose he doesn't get home very soon this harvest time. Father is always late now."

"Yes, they're forced to work while the weather is so fine on account of the corn. Then, Jones is doing piece-work, so he makes a long day of it."

"So is father," said Ellen; "but on Saturday-night they don't reckon to work so late, on account of getting their wages for shop things."

"No, but Jones will; poor fellow, he's forced to keep at it till the very last minute. Have you got your cow yet, Ellen?—for I heard you were going to have one."

"Not yet. It is bought, and will come on Monday, if all go well. There's another blessing we have to be thankful for. I was wishing so much to get a cow, but I hardly thought we could meet with a pasture for her, but Mr. Robertson is going to let us have his."

"Aye, so I heard. And, my word, Ellen!" continued Mrs. Jones, her love of gossip overcoming every other feeling, "you don't know how vexed somebody is about you getting that field."

Ellen opened her eyes in wonder, quite at a loss to know what Mrs. Jones was alluding to.

"You may look, Ellen, but it's the truth. Our master wanted both field and hay for some cattle he'd bought, and when he knew that his brother-in-law had promised them to your father he was cross, and so was the missis. But Ellen, you mustn't let drop a word, for it doesn't do to say anything about those your husband works for. And Mrs. Martin, though she's rather a sharp-spoken woman, has been very kind, and sent me many a thing, especially since this last trouble came. I don't think she's much of a friend of yours, though one hardly durst breathe it."

"I'm sorry, very sorry, if what Mr. Robertson has done to oblige us has been the means of causing any disagreement between him and his relations; but I don't believe he had any idea they wanted it, and certainly we hadn't. I hope you're mistaken about Mrs. Martin."

"I'm not though. Her feelings towards you began a good while ago, when—"

Ellen interrupted Mrs. Jones, who was on the point of going more deeply into the subject. The young woman had a dread of gossip, even when it related to others, and she checked with something like shame the temptation to listen when she herself was an interested party. "I really must go, Mrs. Jones," she said, "for father will soon be home, and I think there is nothing else I can do for you. Dear little Jem seems a good deal better than he did when I came in, don't you think so?"

"Eh dear, yes. He breathes better, and his face is not so burning hot and red. May the Lord reward you for all your kindness to the children and me, Ellen."

"I'll look in again as soon as I can to see how you all get on," said Ellen. "Don't forget that the best Friend of all is ever near you. Look to Him when you are disheartened and cast down."

She pressed Mrs. Jones's hand, gave one more look at the children, and was going towards the door when a hasty knocking was heard, and then the latch was lifted. The new comer was little Margaret Robertson, whose face expressed the greatest terror.

"Mrs. Jones, Mrs. Jones," cried the child, "Mary says you must come to our house this very minute."

"I can do no such thing, Margaret. How am I to leave all these children does she think?"

"But she says you must. She is crying so, for little Willie went to sleep a long time before we came home from school at twelve, and he has not waked yet. Mary is frightened. She has been trying to wake him, but he won't open his eyes whatever she does, and she says she believes he'll die."

"What has the girl done?" exclaimed Mrs. Jones, with a face as pale as ashes. "She must have given the child too much of that—"

She checked herself, for, in the first moments of surprise and fear, she forgot her usual caution, and told what both she and her daughter had ever made a practice of concealing. "I can't go, and yet I ought. O Ellen!"

In utter bewilderment she turned to her friend as if to ask advice and assistance.

"The child must be ill," returned Ellen. "Margaret, run to your Aunt Martin's, it is nearest, and ask her to send some one off for the doctor, and to come herself to your father's. You, Mrs. Jones, had better not leave your family. Beside, you are already too much wearied and agitated with your own matters to be able to afford much help. I will go to Mary."

Feeling all the need for haste, Ellen hurried off in the direction of the carpenter's house, but as she left Mrs. Jones's she saw the half-distracted woman wringing her hands, and heard her exclaim, "If I could but feel sure that Mary is not to blame."

This exclamation convinced Ellen that Mrs. Jones

knew or guessed the cause of the sudden illness of baby Willie. The practice of giving various kinds of sleeping-stuff to the little children was so common in the village that Ellen was quite aware of it, and she knew how often Mrs. Raynor had lifted up her voice against it, and tried to convince the mothers that it was ruinous both to the minds and bodies of their offspring. But the habit was found so convenient—it was such an accommodation to the mother, who wanted to get on with her work, and was hindered by the fretfulness of her baby, to send it off to sleep at pleasure, that too many preferred the present advantage to the real good of their young ones, and continued to risk their health without hesitation. During Ellen's labours in Mrs. Jones's cottage, she had seen enough to convince her that the injurious compound was freely used by her, and she feared Mary had learned to do the same, and this, combined with the mother's exclamation, suggested that George Robertson's baby had been overdosed with it.

On her way to the carpenter's house, Ellen met a person by whom she could send a hasty message to her father, who would otherwise be surprised to find her absent on his return from work. When she arrived she found Mary Jones weeping bitterly, and wringing her hands in the utmost grief and terror, while a little knot of women gathered round the body of little Willie Robertson, were vainly endeavouring to rouse him.

"It's of no use," said one, as Ellen crossed the threshold; "I believe he'll never wake again in this world."

The speaker kissed the small hand which she had been chafing between both her own, and relaxed the efforts which she felt to be useless.

"Oh don't say that, don't say that; let me try. What shall I do? What shall I do? My little darling Willie, wake up and look at Mary."

These and many other such exclamations, accom-

panied by passionate tears and sobs, broke at intervals from the lips of the young housekeeper. Dropping on her knees beside the woman that held the child on her lap, she seized the small hand which the other had laid gently down, and by turns kissed, chafed it, and moistened it with the hot tears that fell in torrents from her eyes.

Deeply pitying the miserable girl, whose words, though broken and unconnected, were yet sufficiently self-accusing to prove that she was not blameless, Ellen looked from her to the other women present. Every face expressed the same conviction as that which had forced itself upon her own mind, namely, that the little one was past all human aid.

Mary Jones too seemed at length to understand this. She dropped the child's hand, and covering her face with both her own, cried, "I never can bear to see my master again." Then turning to the door, she would have left the house, but she was stopped by a strong hand, which obliged her to remain. It was that of the person she most dreaded to see, the father of the dead baby, accompanied by his sister-in-law, Mrs. Martin, and his daughter Margaret.

Evil tidings fly fast. As the carpenter was returning homewards, he had received an intimation that something was wrong at his house, and that the something, whatever it might be, related to his youngest child. The shock was a severe one, though, until he entered the house, he was by no means prepared to find his little one dead. But we know how he had gone from his home in the morning, with a heart full of fatherly tenderness, looking forward to meeting the whole of his household treasures on his return, and to spending a happy Sunday with them around him. His mind was more especially at rest with regard to the youngest, whose condition seemed more hopeful than it had done for some time past. And now, instead of the little arms being extended, as they ever were at the sound of the father's voice, in place

of the crow of delight with which the baby welcome was manifested, those arms lay motionless beside that small still form on the lap of a pitying mother of the company, and the tongue that yesterday had lisped the first attempt at the father's name was stilled for ever.

The little group of lookers-on fell back as Robertson and his companions entered, and stood silent. One glance was sufficient to reveal the truth to the father's anxious eyes, and had it not been, every doubt must have been removed when he lifted the little form in his own arms, placed his cheek over the half open mouth, and pressed his hand to the heart. Neither breath nor throb gave sign of life, and all hope fled. Utterly unnerved by this unexpected trial, Robertson's tears fell fast on the face of the dead baby. Hitherto, Mrs. Martin had not said a word. Usually voluble enough, the sight had proved sufficient to silence her for the time. But now she went to Robertson, and laying her hand on his, said, "Don't take on so, George. The dear little thing has been long ailing, and it has pleased God to take him from a world of trouble and suffering. You know yourself, that you were full of fears about him the other day, and I told you then that I didn't think he would ever be reared."

Robertson by a strong effort overcame his emotion, and replied, "I well remember all you said, Hannah, and what a heavy heart your words gave me, for if ever a father loved his children, I do mine. But last night my little Will was better and stronger than he had been for some time, and I have come home to find him dead."

"Perhaps, George, when the doctor comes he may be able——"

Mrs. Martin was trying to find ground for hope when she knew in reality there was none, but Robertson interrupted her.

"He cannot restore the dead to life, Hannah. Doctors can do much to relieve, but they cannot work

miracles. My little Willie's eyes will never see the light again in this world. But I tell you, plainly, that I do not believe he died from any ailment he had. There has been some foul play, and doctors can find out what has taken life away, though they cannot bring it back again."

At these words Mary Jones, who had stood near the door sobbing bitterly, cried out, "Mr. Robertson, you needn't ask the doctors. I'll tell you the whole truth. It's all my fault, though I wouldn't have hurt the little darling for the world."

She then poured out the whole story—told of her housekeeping difficulties, and all the work which fell upon her young and comparatively inexperienced hands after the sisters of her master ceased to come and give her the benefit of their direction. She owned that her master had expressly forbidden the use of any "sleeping-stuff," "quietness," "cordial," or by whatever name it might be known to Birkdale matrons, and stated, without reserve, how she had been first tempted to a breach of his commands by the persuasions of her own mother, and in what manner she obtained money for purchasing the stuff itself.

"I don't know that I have done harm after all," she said, "except in disobeying master. I gave little Willie some this morning, for I wanted to get on and have my work done in good time, but he hadn't a drop more than he has often had before, and not half as much as I've often seen mother give our little Jem when he was a baby."

Almost before the girl had finished speaking, Mrs. Martin broke out into a torrent of angry reproaches. Hard indeed were the words she used to condemn the disobedience, falsehood, dishonesty, and ingratitude of the girl, and bitterer still the terms she applied to her mother for having been the temptress. "You've murdered the child, Mary Jones," she said, fiercely, "and you deserve—"

"Hush, Hannah!" interposed Robertson. "I



ought never to have trusted the care of my children to one who was little better than a child herself. And hard as it is for me to bear this, I can pity the misguided girl, whose own feelings are a sufficient torment to her at this moment, without any threats. But I must know all about it. Here is Doctor Gray. He shall hear too."

The messenger despatched for the medical man had indeed met him on the road to Birkdale. He could only confirm what all knew before, that the child was dead, and, having been informed of what Mary had already revealed, he questioned her still further by Robertson's desire. It soon appeared that, owing to Mrs. Jones's home troubles, she had been unable to see her daughter for more than a fortnight past, and that Mary had therefore been left to her own resources in order to obtain a supply of "sleeping-stuff." That she had employed a little girl to fetch it from the shop, where it formed an article of constant demand, and that the bottle had been filled afresh only that morning. One teaspoonful was all she had used out of it.

"I must see the bottle, my girl," said the doctor. Mary hesitated. A falsehood was on her tongue, and she was about to say that she had destroyed it, but judging that this might tell rather against than for her, and beside, impelled by conscience to tell the truth, and thus if she could not amend the past, avoid any further sin, she said, "The bottle is in my box up-stairs. I'll fetch it. Go with me," she added, turning to Ellen Richards.

The doctor said, "Go, by all means," but the jealous Mrs. Martin, not satisfied that Ellen should be the only witness, followed, took the bottle from Mary's trembling hand, brought it down-stairs, and placed it in that of the doctor.

Mr. Gray removed the cork, smelled, and just tasted, as doctors are wont to do, then shook his head gravely.

"Well, doctor! What do you say about that stuff?" inquired Robertson.

"That there is no occasion to doubt how this poor little fellow came by his death if he took a teaspoonful of this. It would be a strong dose for you or me, and quite enough to finish a baby twice over, if that could be. This must be looked further into. The people who sold such a powerful drug are highly culpable. This may not be the only little life sacrificed."

As Mr. Gray said this there was a general movement amongst the women who had remained spectators of this scene, and who had increased in number since its commencement, the event having done away with even the scanty ceremony which exists amongst country folk. Kindly village neighbours at all times "pop in and out" of each other's houses without much regard to form, and never dream of giving or taking offence.

Dr. Gray guessed the cause of this movement. Perhaps amongst the mothers present was hardly one who did not dose her child after the same fashion as had proved fatal to Willie Robertson, and the knowledge that this baby's death was owing to "sleeping-stuff," given with *no intention* of hurting him, made the women anxious for the safety of their own young ones.

"I know what makes some of you women look towards the door," said Mr. Gray. "There's too much baby sleeping going on in Birkdale. It gives me many a job when I shouldn't have one, and I warn you all to think what has been the result of it this day. Any mother amongst you might have been the murderer of her own child, just as ignorantly and unintentionally as——"

A bitter cry from Mary Jones restrained the speaker from saying the words which were coming. "God grant," he added, solemnly, "that this sacrifice may prevent many. May it be a warning to you Birkdale mothers. If your arms ache with nursing

and your eyes are weary with watching sometimes, or if the housework comes to a standstill now and then, while you are caring for your babies, never mind. Better to have these than an aching heart or a troubled conscience, telling you that, instead of doing the mother's work at the cost of a little extra nursing, you have sacrificed your child's health for your own ease, and tried to shirk the burthen which God gave you to bear. There's a reward for the diligent self-sacrificing mother in the sight of her healthy children and the approval of her own conscience. And think what any one of you would feel if you had to look on such a scene as this," he added solemnly, pointing to the dead baby, "and know that it was your work?"

Most of the doctor's hearers wept, and there was a shudder amongst them as he made this last appeal, which had an enduring effect on several. They never again made use of a drop of "sleeping-stuff," for fear of the harm that must follow, and the end which in one case they had witnessed.

## CHAPTER X.

### A PROPOSAL.

THE carpenter's house was cleared of all save its master, his children, relatives, the doctor, and Ellen Richards. The latter had stayed behind at the earnest request of Robertson himself.

"I will gladly stay if I can be of any use," said Ellen, "and I hope Mrs. Martin will kindly tell me what I can do."

The assent of the farmer's wife was not very graciously given, but even she felt glad to have one so quietly useful as Ellen Richards beside her at this time. Then there were duties to perform from which she shrank. There would be a coroner's inquest over little Willie, no doubt, and the very sight of that still form was a reproach to Mrs. Martin. She had always thought the child would not live, and had spoken as though the existence of a tiny infant were a thing of small moment, but now that it was cut shorter still through such means, she was full of sincere regret, and self-accusation was added to her other painful feelings. She remembered how she had opposed Mrs. Raynor's sensible proposal respecting Ellen's aunt, and, in a manner, forced her brother-in-law to place his children under the charge of an inexperienced girl, willing to do her best for them, but easily led astray, and without the knowledge which comes only after much training and many years' practice. Then she and her sister had made a promise without considering how almost impossible it would be for them to fulfil it and properly attend to their

own duties; and the result was before her. Mrs. Martin had lost her own first child at a similar age to little Willie. She recalled what was her own grief then, and thought how much it would have been increased had the little one been taken as Robertson's now was.

No wonder she could not bear to look on the dead baby.

In speaking of those who remained under the carpenter's roof one was forgotten. Mary Jones was still there, but not in her master's sight. She had crept into a little back kitchen, and there she remained, sobbing in a passion of grief and remorse. There Ellen found her, and asked Mrs. Martin what the girl was to do.

"Do?" was the angry retort. "Pack out of the house, and go to that good-for-nothing, deceitful mother, whose training has brought her to this pass. It isn't likely," she added, "that Robertson will want to see her again, when she has murdered his baby, and if ever man doted on a child he did on that."

"Oh don't say murdered," sobbed Mary, piteously, as the terrible word fell on her ears. "Mrs. Martin, I didn't mean——"

"You didn't mean! What could you expect? Did not your master tell you enough against giving Willie any of the poison that so many women in Birkdale are so fond of dosing their children with, to say nothing of sister Pierson and myself? You *would* listen to your mother, and you *have* killed the child, wilfully, between you, in spite of warning and telling. As to your mother, she's as ungrateful as she is deceitful, and to think of all my kindness to her! But I've done with her. If Martin is of my mind, neither she nor anybody belonging to her shall set foot on our farm again."

It generally happens that when our own consciences accuse us we try to stifle their upbraidings by looking

round for some one to share the blame. By censuring them we seem to lighten our own burthen. It was so with Mrs. Martin, and, conscious of having at least acted unwisely, she overwhelmed the unfortunate Mary with bitter reproaches in order to make her own share the lighter in comparison.

Mary looked at Ellen Richards as if to implore her to say a kind word, and continued sobbing, but without attempting to defend herself.

"I think it will be better for you to go home, Mary," said Ellen.

"Most likely the constable will be wanting her before long, to give her different lodgings," was Mrs. Martin's sharp remark.

"I shouldn't mind for being sent to prison," cried the girl, "I deserve it, I know; but, please Mrs. Martin, don't be so hard on mother. She has trouble enough with all the children ill, and——" The thought of being the means of taking more sorrow to that afflicted home, was the last bitter drop in the cup of punishment that Mary was drinking through her fault. "What shall I do?" she cried with a fresh burst of anguish.

"I have been with your mother this afternoon, Mary," said Ellen, "and things are pretty straight there. Perhaps you had better go to our house. Father will be home by this time. Tell him I sent you to stay until I can come."

"Aye, get out of our sight," said Mrs. Martin. "Don't let your master see you go, or I wouldn't answer for what he may do."

At this moment Robertson opened the door of the little kitchen. Mary gave a cry of terror, and then, rushing forward in all the recklessness of grief, threw herself on her knees and said, "Master, do forgive me. I did love Willie, I never meant to hurt him. If I could bring him back by giving my own life I would."

Robertson's face showed how deeply he felt this

appeal. "You're suffering punishment enough, Mary," he said, "without my making worse of it. I *do* forgive you, and I trust you will seek forgiveness from God, whom you have offended by falsehood and disobedience. I forgive you, but I bitterly blame myself for ever having acted against my own better judgment, and for placing such a trust in your hands."

The girl herself did not hope for such an answer, and, while it relieved one great weight, it redoubled her remorse and made her feel with increased force the reality of her sin. "If," thought she, "I had but acted up to the teaching I received from Mrs. Raynor both about truth and obedience, I should never have had to think this dear child owed its death to me. I knew better, and that makes me ten times worse."

Slowly and sorrowfully Mary gathered together the things she wanted to take away; and as she took her Bible, given her at the Sunday School, she remembered that the leaves were folded down in various places. These marked passages Mrs. Raynor had especially pointed out to Mary when she came to this her first service. She opened to one. It was the sixth of Ephesians, and there were the words Mrs. Raynor had marked with pencil, "Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ; not with eyeservice as men-pleasers; but as the servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart; with good will doing service, as to the Lord, and not to men." The passage had been made very plain to her. She understood its meaning, and how that in all her doings she was commanded and encouraged to bear in mind that she was in God's presence, doing the work He had appointed for her. Not servant to an earthly master only, but above all to a heavenly one, and accountable to Him for the manner in which she fulfilled her trust. And there was the added promise as well, "Knowing that whatsoever

good thing any man doeth, the same shall he receive of the Lord, whether he be bond or free."

The girl's conscience reminded her that she had gone exactly opposite to this. She had disobeyed her Master in Heaven, at the same time she set at nought the commands of an earthly one. She had feared the latter should find out her fault, but had forgotten that it could not be hidden from the all-seeing eye of God. She had sown the seeds, and was now reaping the bitter fruit of her sin.

As soon as she was ready, Mary took her bundle and stole softly out of the house, thankful that it was getting dark, and that clouds hid the rising moon. She dreaded to meet the eye of any person, for by this time every dweller in Birkdale would know what she had done, and though they might, many of them, be guilty of running the same risk, yet so long as the same consequences did not follow, her share of blame would be deemed none the less.

There was one, however, who met and recognised Mary. This was Mr. Gray, the Wolftown surgeon. He called her by name, and her heart beat faster as she answered him. "You must go home as soon as possible. I have just come from your house, where I had been to see the sick children."

"O sir, I dare not go home," replied Mary.

"You must. Your mother knows all that has happened, and, after what I have said, cannot, I think, reproach you for the consequences of the fault she first induced you to commit. Beside, she has trouble enough of a different kind. Little Jem is dying, and, with the others ill, she needs your presence and help. Go and do your best for her."

The girl obeyed without further hesitation, and found all as the doctor had said. Her little brother only lived a few minutes after her arrival home, and the mother found Mary's presence so necessary, that in the help afforded, and the thought of her own more immediate troubles, she almost lost sight of the



circumstances which had brought her daughter home at that particular time.

Mr. Gray readily discovered how it was that the usual dose had proved fatal to Willie Robertson. Mary, no longer able to obtain a supply of the "quietness," through her mother, had sent a little girl to the village shop with the empty bottle. The child had simply asked for "sleeping-stuff," and the shop boy, too much accustomed to supply a stronger potion, had filled the bottle with laudanum. No wonder the child awoke no more after being thus put to sleep.

There was an inquest; these facts were told, and the shopkeepers were severely reprimanded by the Coroner. Mr. Gray took occasion to show, that though in the case of Robertson's baby, pure and not adulterated laudanum had caused death, yet the use of all those varieties of sleeping potions in which the women of Birkdale, and, alas! too many others, are apt to indulge, ought to be strongly condemned as certain, sooner or later, to inflict great injury on the little ones. His words carried weight and produced a good effect on many. Let us hope they may now convey a warning to more.

There was a little coffin carried from the carpenter's house, followed by a mourning father and many sympathizing neighbours; and a great pang passed through that father's heart when he looked at the empty cradle, and thought how it had become so.

There was another funeral, too, from Mrs. Jones's cottage, and though the mother had so many children left, she yet lifted up her voice and wept bitterly. With all her faults, she loved them dearly, and little tiresome, mischievous Jem, whose busy fingers were always making work for his mother, and who, when living and in health, never could be scolded or cuffed into quietness, was as much mourned and missed as though bread had never been scarce, or the mouths so many that the humble parents knew not how to find food for all their offspring.

Mrs. Jones's troubles pleaded for her. Neighbours could not find in their hearts to blame, at any rate aloud, one who was in such grief, or to add anything to the load which seemed more than she could bear. Even Mrs. Martin, though she refused to go near her, or allow Mary to set foot on the farm, did not carry out her threat towards the whole family, and Jones continued to work for her husband as before.

Though there were no more little children under George Robertson's roof the carpenter could not bear to have Mary Jones back again. "She is able enough to do the work, and I believe, let her go where she may, she has had a lesson which will last her lifetime, and prevent a repetition of her former conduct. But, though I have forgiven her, I could not bear to see her about the house."

It was, however, absolutely necessary that some person should be found to take Mary's place, but neither of Robertson's sisters-in-law ventured to hint at any one as fitting to be her successor. There was something in his manner which told that he would judge for himself. And he did so.

It was rather before the time that James Richards left work, but not before Ellen's milking was done and a great part of her milk disposed of, that the young woman heard the latch of the little gate behind her. She was in the act of hanging her tin pails, well scalded and brightened, upon the railing, as is customary with cleanly managers of a dairy, to become thoroughly sweetened in the pure air before being used again. On turning she observed the carpenter, and cheerfully wished him good evening.

"Father has not come in yet, Mr. Robertson," she said, "but he will not be long."

"I was wanting to speak to you, Ellen," returned the visitor, "and I came thinking I should be sure to find you at home."

"I'm not often far away at this time of the evening. Will you walk in?"

Robertson followed her into the cottage and sat down. How bright the little home always looked! James Richards was indeed much blessed in his daughter.

Robertson hesitated and sat silent for a few minutes, then said rather abruptly, "It is just twelve months to-day since I lost my poor Margaret, and about this time Martin came to tell me."

"I remember," said Ellen, softly. "It is a sorrowful anniversary for you, Mr. Robertson."

"It is; for in Margaret I had one of the best of wives, and ours had been a happy married life." He paused a moment, and then went on. "Mrs. Raynor advised me then to ask your Aunt Wilkinson to be my housekeeper and to take charge of my home and children. Others opposed it, and I let myself be guided by them, though I felt I was unwise to trust so much to a girl like Mary Jones. And now, though the poor little one is taken, there are the others. I have had them too little at home, because there was no good mother to guide and teach them. You, Ellen, are more like the one they have lost than any other I have ever seen: will you supply her place to my boy and girl?"

"I had no thought of taking another situation, Mr. Robertson," returned Ellen, not comprehending the speaker's full meaning. "My father wants me, and I promised to stay and care for him."

"You don't understand me, Ellen. I ask you to be my wife, and a mother to my children,—to fill the place of my poor Margaret, and make my home something like what it was until a year ago. I have never seen any one who could fill the blank as you can, who could be to me and mine all that she was. As to your father, there would be no need for you to be parted from him. There's room enough in my house for him too."

Before Ellen had time to make any answer to this unexpected proposal her father entered, and to him the carpenter repeated all he had already said to the daughter.

But we will not mention all the conversation that followed. It will be sufficient to say that the carpenter prospered in his suit, and that the consent of James Richards was willingly given. To the proposal that he should become an inmate of the home that his daughter, when married, would be mistress of, the old cottager stoutly refused his assent.

"No, no, Mr. Robertson," said James, "that would never do. I should give Birkdale folks something to talk about if I were to come along with Ellen. It isn't many I should like to say 'Yes' to when they asked for my girl, for she's a good lass, and deserves a good husband. I believe you'll be that, for I've known you from a baby, as I may say, but there isn't the man living that I *would* say 'Yes' to if he asked me to go along with my daughter. I shall be able, please God, to keep a little roof over my head by the work of my hands, for if I'm not so young as I was I am stout and strong for my time of life. And you must let Ellen look after her old father a bit, not so as to interfere with her own duty to you and yours, but just enough to keep things going on right."

"But, father," said Ellen, "looking in now and then won't keep all right or make you comfortable."

"I'm not going to trust to you for everything, child. I must have a housekeeper, and I know of one. I saw that poor lass of Jones's just now, and I was talking to her. She says that as the harvest is nearly over, and the young ones getting better, she ought to be looking out for a place, but she doesn't know how to go about it, for she expects nobody will have her. Now I think, with the little looking after Ellen might give, she would do very well for

"And I believe," interposed Ellen, "that Mary has not only suffered much, but that the pain caused by the recollection of her past errors has humbled her much also, and led her to seek pardon from God, and strength to sustain her in a right course."

Ellen did not tell how much she had striven to help her young neighbour, or how, when many had looked coldly on the girl, she had been her friend, adviser, and teacher

## CHAPTER XI.

### A FEW WORDS ABOUT MATRIMONY.

ROBERTSON was determined that Mrs. Martin should hear from his own lips the news which he was well aware would be anything but palatable either to her or her sister. It was too late to call that night, for he had much to talk over and arrange with Ellen and her father before he left the cottage, but, on the following evening, he walked as far as the farm. Mrs. Martin was from home, and her husband was on the point of leaving the house.

"I was just going as far as Pierson's," said he. "Hannah is there talking with Jane about the harvest supper. We always join and make one stir do, and the women settle about the cooking and so on together. It'll be next Thursday. I hope you'll step up and join us. My missis was coming to ask you. But if you'll walk with me to Pierson's you'll see her there."

To this Robertson agreed, and on their arrival they found the two matrons deep in consultation respecting the good cheer to be provided for the workpeople, and the share of cooking to be undertaken by each. The invitation for George to join in celebrating the Harvest-Home was repeated by his sisters-in-law, and accepted by him. Then, other weighty matters having been settled, the ladies joined in more general conversation.

"I should like you to spare Jenny Parkinson for all Thursday if you can, George," said Mrs. Pierson. "She is very useful at such times. The children will be here, of course, and you too."

Jenny Parkinson had "done for" George since the departure of Mary Jones. She was the wife of a labouring man, one of those useful folk who are to be found in every village ready to fill any domestic gap, and, as she lived close by the carpenter's house, she had undertaken to manage for him until he could meet with some one more suitable.

Robertson assured his sisters-in-law that Jenny should be quite at liberty on the important day, and then Mrs. Martin inquired if he had met with a housekeeper.

"Well, yes," he answered; "Ellen Richards is coming." He saw the glance that passed between the two women, but he added steadily, "Is coming to be my wife, and a mother to my children. It is only just settled, and I called at your place on purpose to tell you. I ought to be thankful that so good a daughter is willing to undertake such a charge."

George said a good deal more, but the answers he obtained were very brief indeed. Satisfied, however, that he had shown all needful consideration to the nearest relatives of his late wife, he left them to digest as best they might the news they had just heard. "They will be a bit vexed at first, I dare say," thought he, "but it will pass off soon; and they must understand that I have made a prudent choice, and one that is as much for the good of the children as my own comfort. And Ellen is so sweet-tempered she might soften anybody."

Not those George had just left. For a few minutes after his departure the sisters sat, silently looking at each other.

"I always said it," exclaimed Mrs. Martin at length, and feeling it some consolation to be able to lay claim to foreknowledge. "To think that Ellen Richards is to stand in poor Margaret's shoes!"

"I was completely thunderstruck," replied Mrs. Pierson. "You *had* said it, Hannah, many a time, and you never liked the girl, but I own I could hardly

bring myself to think George would ever marry a common servant."

"After having had a wife like Margaret, who was brought up a lady, and always looked one, poor thing. More's the pity she should ever ha' married a man as valued her no more."

"George wasn't a bad husband, Hannah. I never saw a man fonder of his wife," remarked Mrs. Pierson, wishing even George to have his due. "And he did grieve after her."

"Humph! The blethering cow is always first to forget its calf," retorted Mrs. Martin, in the words of a very homely but expressive proverb, by which folk in agricultural districts often rebuke the violent grief that is as short-lived as it is extravagant.

"I often used to think that poor Margaret looked more of a lady than even the Squire's wife, though one durstn't say that to anybody," remarked Mrs. Pierson, dropping her voice to a whisper, as if it were treason to compare her deceased sister with the landlord's lady.

"I can't bear to think, Jane. It puts me out past everything. It'll be well if all the cooking isn't spoiled after this, and the harvest supper such as it never was before. I hardly knew how to ask George to it, for I was afraid it would bring back his trouble, being as he always used to come with Margaret."

"All but last year, Hannah."

"Last year she'd just been a week buried when we had the supper. Harvest was no later than it is this year."

"I feel most for little Margaret. Fred is more like his father. I've never thought so much of him, though one couldn't make a difference between them, specially as they are twins, and so fond of one another. However, I shall stick to Margaret, and do what I can for her."

Much more was said by the sisters in their indignation. They never considered that in giving these



children, for a second mother, a young woman so sensible, quiet, and judicious, as Ellen Richards, one, too, whose unassuming piety pervaded her whole life, Robertson was doing his best to promote their true interest, and to fill the void created by the death of his wife.

During the few weeks which passed before the marriage of Robertson and Ellen Richards, many were the hints of coming hardships which were dropped in the hearing of the carpenter's twin children. Their own mother was often mentioned, and her superior "bringing up" alluded to, in contrast with that of the cottager's daughter, who had been Aunt Martin's nurse-girl, and a servant all her life.

Robertson observed that he was coolly received by both his sisters-in-law, but he still hoped this would pass off when they should see more of Ellen. This, however, they appeared resolved not to do. In compliance with his request Ellen went herself to give them an invitation to the modest wedding.

"We are going to have nobody else," she said, "except a cousin of mine who is to be bridesmaid, but we should very much like you to come."

Mrs. Picrson might perhaps have consented, but not so her sister. The former was softened by the simple kindness and modesty of Ellen's manners, but Mrs. Martin was only glad that she was allowed the chance of refusing the invitation. She accordingly declined it in a very stiff manner, but did not hesitate to tell her reasons for so doing out of any regard for Ellen's feelings.

"I'm much obliged to you for the invitation," she said, "but it would be too much for me; I know it would. It's only little more than a twelvemonth since I was at my sister's funeral, as I dare say you remember, Ellen, and I'm wearing black for her yet, and shall do the winter through, though some folks seem to have forgotten her, poor thing! And if I were to dress myself in colours and come to George's

wedding, my heart would be so heavy I should only be a damp upon everybody. I'm obliged to you, all the same, and I wish you much happiness, I'm sure, but I'm best away."

It was of no use to try any persuasions after this. Ellen was conscious that Mrs. Martin intended to give her pain by the allusions contained in her speech. Nay, if ever tone and looks gave contradiction to a person's words, Ellen felt that Mrs. Martin's did when she offered her good wishes. Of this contradiction she, however, took no notice, but thanked Mrs. Martin for the wish, and said she was most anxious to do her best for the children, and trusted they would find her as careful for their comfort as if she were really their mother.

Mrs. Martin shook her head in mournful fashion. "You *may* mean well, Ellen, I hope you do; but *my* sister Margaret was one in a thousand."

"She was a good woman," replied Ellen, warmly, "and the thought of the children being hers will make me more anxious to do well by them. If it please God to spare me and enable me to keep my resolution, you will see whether I do my duty by them or not, Mrs. Martin. And I do hope you will some day think better of me, and feel more kindly towards me, than you now do."

With a hasty "good day," Ellen left the house, half vexed that she had allowed herself to say so much, and fearful of the retort that might follow. She had gone with a heart full of goodwill, and most anxious to soften Mrs. Martin by making the first advances, but the answer received had chilled her kindly intentions, and she was pained by the hints thrown out respecting her unworthiness to follow the speaker's sister.

Robertson was anxious to know how Ellen had been received at the farm, and not a little indignant when, by dint of questioning, he found out how the invitation had been refused. "Never mind, Ellen," said

he, "the next time you ask Aunt Martin she'll come. We shall be better without her, for when she isn't in a good mood she makes everybody uncomfortable, and it would have suited me badly to see her with a face like a thunder-cloud, or to hear her throwing out ill-natured hints at you. The sisters always go together in everything, though Jane is of a deal softer nature, and would show it if it were not for Hannah ruling her as she does."

"They have both a deal of kindness in them after all," said Ellen, willing to make excuses for them; for hers was the charity which "thinketh no evil," "and by-and-by I believe they will look on me with different eyes."

"Yes, they are kind to those they take to, but Hannah is very bitter against a person who once offends her. That's not what Christ taught, Ellen. 'If ye love them which love you, what reward have ye?' He asked, and bade us, 'Love your enemies.' Still poor Margaret's sisters were so proud of her that we must try to excuse them for being a bit prejudiced, and thinking nobody good enough to follow her."

Ellen thought she would try very hard to conquer any ill-feeling against herself, and would prove by her conduct towards the children that there was no ground for it to be cherished. Most earnestly and prayerfully did she seek for help and strength to confirm her in her determination. When she entered upon a wife's duties and responsibilities she did so with a deep sense of their importance. It was not lightly or carelessly, not for the sake of the bustle of a wedding, or to wear unwonted finery unbecoming her position. Not for the sake of change, or to bear a new name and escape from parental control, or in a spirit of levity—all motives which too often move girls to rush into the holy estate of matrimony.

Yet I am wrong to call it "holy" when either mere worldly interest, giddiness, or the whim of a moment is the incentive to marriage. The estate is hallowed

when two persons enter upon it filled with mutual love and trust, for this last is absolutely essential to wedded happiness. To use the beautiful and expressive words of our Church service, it should be taken in hand "reverently, discreetly, and advisedly, soberly, and in the fear of God."

On the eve of her marriage, all her simple preparations being completed, and her modest and becoming wedding attire all laid ready for the morrow, Ellen took out her Prayer-book, and read over again the words of the Marriage Service. She had received a letter from her former mistress and steady friend, Mrs. Raynor, and another from Mrs. Selkirk, her own last employer, to both of whom she had communicated her intended change. The pretty, sober-coloured silk dress, and light shawl, more expensive than she would herself have purchased for the occasion, were the gifts of the late Vicar's wife, and her sister-in-law, and we may be sure highly valued on that account.

But, perhaps, the kind words and good advice contained in Mrs. Raynor's letter to her old servant were more precious still, for they evinced a desire for Ellen's welfare, and an interest in her fortunes, which the most costly gifts could not convey. Mrs. Raynor gave Ellen counsel with regard to her conduct towards the children for whom she was about to undertake a mother's duties, and alluded with much good sense to the difficulties which might arise in their fulfilment. "I know," she wrote, "that to many persons the very name of 'stepmother' conveys an idea of harshness and unkindness, and that some unwise folk make a point of pitying children because they have one. No doubt some stepmothers have abused the trust placed in them, and failed in their duty. But unfortunately too many mothers do the same, and are as careless as the greatest stranger could be about promoting the spiritual and temporal good of their offspring; only people are more on the watch to notice and censure such faults in the former case. From my own

experience, Ellen, and it has been considerable, I have reason to think that more stepmothers err by being too indulgent than the contrary. They are afraid of censure if they use the same authority over the children of a former wife as over their own, afraid of being blamed for harshness when they only correct what they see requires amending. But the same Book which teaches a mother's duty to her own children is an unfailing guide in this case. Let the Word of God be your teacher, Ellen, for in it, whether as wife, mother, daughter, friend, or neighbour, you will find counsel and comfort. Do to these dear young ones as you would to your own, and if your *conscience* tells you that you have fulfilled a mother's duty towards them, you will have little to fear from prying eyes and gossiping tongues.

"With regard to your husband and yourself, let there be no secrets between you. I have had many years' experience as a wife, and you, who have resided under my roof, know how happily and peacefully my dear husband and I have lived together. I believe one great cause for this is that *we place entire confidence in each other. There were sincere love and esteem to begin with, and these were cemented by TRUST.* I have often said that I could wish my husband to read my thoughts as an open book, and been made glad by the answer, 'Dear Emily, I *do* read your heart in your daily life and conduct.'

"These words, Ellen, sounded very sweetly in my ears, as you may well imagine.

"Again, never let pride prevent your owning a fault, if you feel that you have committed one. Believe me that, by yielding, we are ourselves the gainers. Stubbornness and pride alway excite the same feelings in others. There is a sort of wish to beat us with our own weapons; but if we bend our wills, and, by God's help, subdue our tempers, gentleness conquers where sullenness or anger would fail.

"I know there is a prejudice in Birkdale, and I

dare say elsewhere, against reading the Marriage Service before you go to take the most solemn part in it. I trust you will let no idle saying prevent your reading it carefully, and asking yourself, 'Can I make these responses from my heart? Do I mean to fulfil these solemn promises? Am I indeed determined, day by day, to seek strength from above, lest I fail in any part of a wife's duty through trusting only to my own?' And even after marriage I do not think we have done with the Service. I have found it profitable, from time to time, to recal the words of my marriage vow, and to examine myself strictly as to the manner in which I have kept it.

"Last of all I would mention what has been the custom of my husband and myself ever since our marriage day. We have always knelt together, just we two, and taken it in turns to offer up our prayers for forgiveness of daily sins, for the supply of daily wants, for our children and those nearest to us, together with our thanksgivings for mercies received. This habit has been an additional bond between us, for, oh Ellen, if there had been any angry feeling, how could it stay when we knelt together before God's footstool? And we claimed the fulfilment of a blessed and gracious promise when we thus approached our Heavenly Father with one heart and voice. 'Again I say unto you, That if two of you shall agree on earth as touching anything that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of My Father which is in Heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in My Name, there am I in the midst of them.'

"You see, Ellen, the promise of a gracious answer to a united prayer.

"And now I must finish my long letter. Mr. Raynor and our children join me in every good wish for your continued happiness, and in the prayer that you may be greatly blessed as a wife.

"Believe me, always very sincerely yours,

"EMILY RAYNOR."

In compliance with the advice contained in the above letter, and the promptings of her own heart also, Ellen read the Marriage Service, and carefully examined herself as to the feelings with which she was about to undertake a wife's duties. While thus engaged Mrs. Jones entered. Mary had already been backwards and forwards to the cottage to be instructed by Ellen, and on the morrow was to become house-keeper to James Richards in place of his daughter.

Mrs. Jones glanced at the book in Ellen's hand.

"Eh!" she exclaimed, "did you never hear anybody say how unlucky it is to read that before you go to church to get married? I am sorry you've done it. There was my husband's sister, silly thing, wouldn't be advised, and I am sure she had ill-luck enough to have warned anybody."

"I have often heard that saying, Mrs. Jones," replied Ellen. "Yet I should be very sorry to enter on a solemn covenant like marriage without knowing the terms of my bargain. Why, you wouldn't purchase an apron without seeing it and knowing the price, yet——"

"That's a very different thing," interposed Mrs. Jones.

"It is indeed. Here I am going to enter into a covenant, and make promises which are to bind me for life, and, according to your advice, I ought to know less about them than you do about buying a little article of dress. As to the 'ill-luck' of Jones's sister, no one can wonder at it. She married a man who had injured his health by intemperance, and who continued his bad habits until he was quite unable to labour for his family. She knew that he had 'no fear of God before his eyes,' and yet, though she had been so differently taught, she disregarded the command, 'Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers,' and became the wife of a man who had not entered the house of God for years before he went there to take those solemn marriage vows upon him

Was it any wonder that they were unhappy? That she saw her husband, in spite of failing health, continue his evil courses; that his example was followed by their boys, who imitated the father and even went beyond him in vice; and now she is widowed, poor, and worse than childless, for she has undutiful children? Depend on it, Mrs. Jones, that all this 'ill-luck,' as you call it, did not come because your sister-in-law read the Marriage Service, but because she thought too little of the covenant on which she was entering, and, in her very choice of a husband, disobeyed the command and slighted the counsel contained in God's Holy Word."

"Well, Ellen, I'm sure I hope you'll be luckier. There may be something in what you say, but somehow I can't fancy going against these old proverbs, as one may call 'em. I've heard my mother talk in the same way many a time, and I don't like setting up to be so much wiser than my betters."

Ellen might easily have retorted that if even a mother advised what was contrary to common sense, or, still more, what was in disobedience to God's law, it were better to seek a higher authority for our actions. But having no desire to cause strife she remained silent, though wondering that her neighbour should so soon have forgotten the evil result of her own injudicious advice—which had been a snare to her own daughter, and which the girl would remember with bitter remorse so long as she live



## CHAPTER XII.

### HEART-BURNINGS AND HARD JUDGMENTS.

BUT little has been hitherto said respecting the twin children of George Robertson. They were much alike in features and disposition, as is so often the case with twins, and, during their mother's life, went to the same school, shared in the same plays, and were seldom seen apart. Now, however, they were less together. Frederic was too old to remain under the Birkdale schoolmistress. But he, in common with the boys of the village and two other parishes, could claim free education at an endowed school situated a little on the Birkdale side of Woltown. In order to avail themselves of this privilege—which was really no light one, as it offered a superior education, together with all necessary books, free of cost—Birkdale boys must walk between three or four miles to school in the morning, and the same back at night, in all weathers. They must be regular in their attendance also, for an absence of two successive days, except from illness, would lose them their rank and place in class.

But country lads, accustomed to plenty of active exercise, thought little of the walk to school, and used to meet at a certain time to go in company, with satchels in hand containing books and dinner. They had sitting enough in school to rest them after the ramble, and were no less disposed for active games during the dinner hour than were those who lived close by, and therefore missed the early morning walk thither.

Fred Robertson began his attendance at the Free School some months before his father's marriage with Ellen Richards. His sister and he were therefore separated during the day, Margaret still going to the village school with her cousin, Fanny Pierson, who was about her own age. Aunt Martin's children were boys, all older than the Robertsons. Two were already apprenticed to different tradesmen in Wolf-town, and the youngest assisted his father on the farm.

Margaret was a good deal petted by both her aunts. Mrs. Pierson liked her as a companion for her only daughter, not the less so because in appearance she resembled her mother. Aunt Martin, too, was fond of having a girl about her, and, though she owned three sturdy boys, always wished that one had been a daughter. Owing to these circumstances, though the child had lost her own mother, she seemed to have almost parental affection from both her aunts, though it was not always wisely manifested. This was especially the case at the time of the carpenter's second marriage. Margaret heard them lament her father's union with Ellen Richards, compare her disadvantageously with her deceased mother, and was, in fact, encouraged to treat the new Mrs. Robertson with disrespect. But for them, Ellen's manner would have won upon the little girl as it did upon her brother, who was much less under the influence of his aunts than was Margaret.

But for Mrs. Robertson the carpenter would not have allowed his daughter to go to either farm-house after the manner in which Ellen's invitation had been answered, and the refusal of his sisters-in-law to be present at their quiet wedding. Ellen, however, reminded him of the many kindnesses his daughter had shared with her cousins, and said, "I feel, George, that in one sense it would be better for Margaret to go less, but the child looks upon the homes of her two aunts as such to herself. If she were forbidden to

go there, you might be called ungrateful, and I should be blamed for causing estrangement between you and the rest of the family. I will try to make this home so pleasant to the children that, in time, they will love it better than any other place. I am sure Freddy is beginning to love me."

"There is a difference between him and Margaret in that. I notice that when they say 'good night,' the lad kisses you heartily, but my little lass turns her cheek for the caress, which she just lets you give, but never returns."

"Freddy and she love one another dearly. The boy will work with us, and, George, the prayers which we have offered together every day for peace and unity in our little home cannot have been offered in vain. We shall have our answer in God's good time. May He give us patience to wait for it."

"Amen, dear Ellen. I believe you are right. Things will work round if we do nothing in an unchristian spirit. You will conquer Aunt Martin herself, by dint of never opposing her, and as to my little Maggie, a child's heart is not often hard and insensible to true kindness and affection."

At the time this conversation was taking place under the carpenter's roof, Mrs. Martin was talking to her niece in a very different spirit. A very little matter which had been reported to her by a village gossip—in fact, our acquaintance Mrs. Jones, who *could not* keep that unruly member, her tongue, in subjection—had caused no small heart-burning in the mind of the farmer's wife.

During the first Mrs. Robertson's residence with the aunt who adopted her, and with whom she spent her girlish days, she had become possessed of several trinkets of some value, all given by that relative to whom she was as a daughter. Amongst these were a gold watch and chain of excellent workmanship, and sundry brooches. These the carpenter had locked up after his wife's death, with the intention of reserving

them until his little daughter should be old enough to use and take care of them.

The piece of information which had so vexed Mrs. Martin was that Robertson's second wife had been seen to wear a gold watch. "I'll be bound it is poor Margaret's then," she said. "He always said he should keep it for little Maggie, but I suppose this new missis must have everything. It'll become her well to wear my sister's things. But I *will* know. Maggie's out with her uncle, and when they come in I'll ask her."

It was not long before not only Maggie but her brother entered; Fred having been requested to call for his sister.

"Maggie, dear," asked Mrs. Martin, "has father bought his wife"—she would not say your mother—"a watch?"

"No, aunt; but she had my mother's on last Sunday."

"I thought it was to be saved for you, Maggie," returned her aunt, with a sigh; "but things are changed."

"I'll tell you how it was, aunt," interposed Frederic, stoutly. "The watch was laid by, and it had been ever since my mother died, and the watchmaker said it would do it more harm to let it stand than to keep it going. It *is* to be kept for Maggie."

"The chain won't improve with wearing, at any rate."

"That is just what mother said, and she made father wrap it up with the brooches and things in cotton wool, and lock them in his desk. And she *is* so careful of the watch you can't think. She has only had it on twice because father wanted her, and then she just had a black ribbon to it, and the watch was in a little wash-leather case in her pocket. It will be no worse for that, will it, aunt?"

Mrs. Martin made no answer to the boy's question,

because, to own the truth, she would have been better pleased to find more cause to blame Ellen.

When we have misjudged a person, we are not often displeased with ourselves, as we ought to be, for our uncharitable conduct, but rather inclined to be angry with him who proves that we are unjust by not deserving the accusation. If we learn to think no evil, to rejoice not in iniquity but to rejoice in the truth, then do we show who is our teacher. For it is only when taught of God, when His love is "shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us," that we learn to love our neighbour also, and to exercise the charity which "suffereth long, and is kind."

Mrs. Martin was not, however, one whose heart had been thus touched and taught. She would have been glad to find Ellen guilty of something which would justify her accusation. If the newly wedded wife had shown a selfish anxiety to possess herself of the trinkets and clothes that had belonged to her sister, Mrs. Martin would have railed against her for it, but then, she would have felt a pleasure in declaring also that it was exactly what she expected and always foretold. As it was, poor Ellen got small credit. Mrs. Martin still looked forward to the fulfilment of her prophecy, and said in confidential talk with her sister, "You'll see she'll get all poor Margaret's things in time. She'll draw back at first; but she's made a beginning with the watch, and the rest will follow. I dare say she felt afraid of what we might say if she launched out too far."

"I don't know that, Hannah. Ellen seems very modest, and I really think if it hadn't been for you saying so much against it, I might ha' gone down to see George and her before now. You said she'd not let the children come near us after she was married, but you see she does."

"It saves her trouble, and gets 'em out of the way," was the ungracious answer, Mrs. Martin being quite





resolved not to give Ellen credit for acting from a more kindly motive.

Aunt Pierson's conscience once more moved her to say a word for Ellen. "That mayn't be the reason she lets Maggie come. You know, Hannah, if the children were little and there were others less still to look after and do for, she might be thankful, as I don't deny I should be, to get one or two of them out of the way, 'specially if a relation who took care of them would have 'em. But Maggie's of an age to be useful. She can sew very nicely, and I must say I see her improved since Ellen and George were married. Then, she'd be a nice companion when he was out, for Ellen's like to be a good deal left by herself."

"It is a queer thing, Jane, how you take sides with Ellen. If I were you I'd go and tell her all this, and make her think more of herself than she does, and that's needless."

"I'm not going to tell her anything," was the meek reply, "though I won't deny, Hannah, that if it hadn't been for what you said I should ha' been more neighbourly with Ellen."

"Don't let me hinder you, Jane," returned Mrs. Martin, with increased sharpness of tone and manner. "To be sure I'm your sister, but take to a stranger if you like."

"Nay, Hannah, don't let's have any words. You know I am not the one to quarrel, least of all with my own flesh and blood. There was poor Margaret and me never had a word, and it was a great comfort when she was taken from us so suddenly that I could look back on all the years that had passed since we were little children together, and think that there had been nothing between us two that was unloving or unbecoming of sisters. And now I've only you left I'm not going to begin falling out. We have our likes and dislikes, and we can't help thinking differently at times. But I'd hold my tongue sooner than



say what should cause unpleasantness between you and me."

There was a good deal of the peacemaker about Aunt Pierson. She did not like to be "at outs," as she styled it, with anybody, and this disposition, while it made her almost too yielding, won for her much love and goodwill amongst Birkdale folk, who were apt to draw comparisons between her and Mrs. Martin not much to the advantage of the latter. And it must have been a pleasant thing for Mrs. Pierson to look back upon a life of uninterrupted peace and friendship with her sister Margaret. I use the word "friendship" because kindred does not always mean it. Many who are knit by the closest ties of relationship are as far from being friends as though no such bond existed. Nay, it is too well known that when relatives *are* foes, there are no enemies so bitter, none so difficult to make "at one" again with each other, as those whom Nature meant to be friends from their very birth. We know who "maketh men to be of one mind in an house," who came on earth heralded by Angels crying "On earth peace, goodwill toward men."

Yet the followers of Him, who is the Prince of Peace, differ from those who are simply silent from a love of their own ease, or because they have not much energy, and yield, even when they are right, rather than oppose themselves to a person of more determined character.

This was Aunt Pierson's case, when listening to her sister's arguments. She felt that Hannah was prejudiced and unreasonable; she leaned towards her brother-in-law and his wife, and would have liked to include them in the family bond. She wished to tell Mrs. Martin that, so far from saving herself trouble on account of Fred and Margaret, to her certain knowledge Ellen spared neither pains, time, nor labour to add to their comfort. During Mary Jones's house-keeping days it may well be supposed that many of

the children's clothes, as also the household linen, fell into a grievous state of disrepair, those young hands, though willing, being unable to do all that was needful.

Now how different things were. There was order in the house itself, and all belonging to its inmates. Mrs. Pierson had observed the improvement in Margaret's clothes, and was conscious that much taste, as well as labour, had been bestowed on them. They might have been made whole and neat with far less trouble than had been given, and, when Mrs. Pierson asked by whose hand a gown which had belonged to the first Mrs. Robertson had received the alteration which adapted it to her niece, she found Ellen's industrious fingers alone had laboured at it. "It might ha' been done by my poor sister herself, it was so tasteful and nice," she remarked. "Ellen can't be idle or wishful to save herself, either;" and as Aunt Pierson scanned the work again and again she thought, "How pleasant it would have been if only Hannah could ha' brought her mind to being friendly with George's new wife! I could have asked her about things as I used to ask poor Margaret, for sister Martin never had the same taste. There's that second-best silk gown of mine that wants turning. As likely as not Ellen would have done it for me if——"

But we must not follow all Aunt Pierson's thoughts about Ellen, or her regrets that she and Mrs. Martin were not friends. After the last conversation between the sisters, the former made up her mind not to attempt any further defence of Robertson's wife. "She'll maybe see for herself in time," she said. "And, if she doesn't, all my saying would do no good, only make her more resolute. Whether Hannah's right or wrong, I stick to my sister before a woman that is nought akin."

## CHAPTER XIII.

### FAMILY CHANGES.

WE pass over much, and give an outline only of what happened during the years which followed the events already related. Unfortunately, neither the expressed hopes of George Robertson, nor the more secret wishes of his peaceful sister-in-law, were fulfilled. On the contrary, the families lived almost as strangers to each other, exchanging no visits, keeping up no intimacy, except that Margaret's affection for her aunts remained unaltered. During the first five years after the carpenter's second marriage three more children were born to him, and then his eldest daughter was encouraged by Aunt Martin to think herself ill-used, because she was required to assist their mother. Overlooking the fact that they were her father's little ones, and equally entitled to share his love with herself, Margaret thought herself ill-used at having to nurse Ellen's children, though Ellen had bestowed on her step-daughter all a mother's care and affection.

With Fred the case was different. After passing five years as a pupil in the Wolftown Free School, and thoroughly using his opportunities, he left it and joined his father in the workshop. A fine, robust, intelligent lad was he, and, for his years, a good scholar. His aunts thought it a pity their sister's son should become a mechanic. "The little brother," they said, "might do for that some day," but Frederic had made up his mind to be a help to his father, and he set manfully to work. He loved his stepmother,

too, very sincerely, and when he went into the house Ellen's face would light up with a glad smile of welcome like that which greeted her husband's coming.

As soon as he was ready to sit down, it would be, "Mother, give me the baby," if Ellen were nursing; or, if the least of the three were asleep, there was Willie, called after the dead darling, and Jenny, who could just toddle to meet him and clasp his knees. These shared the lad's cheery, kindly caresses; one mounted on his shoulder, the other trotting by his side, they would be seen watching the servant milking in the new pasture just by the house, or going to meet grandfather, as old James Richards dropped in to see his daughter. In the affection of her stepson, Ellen Robertson reaped the reward which her conduct well deserved, though it failed to win it from his sister also.

A year before Frederic left school, Farmer Pierson received an increase of property by the death of a childless relative, and in consequence of this removed from Birkdale. Margaret Robertson accompanied her uncle and aunt to their new home, in compliance with their oft-repeated entreaties. These would not have succeeded, but the carpenter was very anxious to give his daughter a little better education than was within her reach at Birkdale, and his means would not permit him to send her to a superior school elsewhere. Her Aunt Pierson offered, however, to give her the same advantages as she purposed bestowing on her own daughter when they should get to the new farm. "In fact," she said, "both the girls shall have the same sort of bringing-up as Maggie's own dear mother had, and it shan't cost you a farthing, George. My husband's willing and you've more children to do for. My Fanny will almost break her heart if you part her from Margaret." Robertson hesitated. He did not like the idea of a separation from his eldest daughter, but, as he looked at the three little ones,

and thought more might yet be added to his family, he scarcely deemed himself justified in refusing the benefits thus offered. It would be, he thought, a great thing to have Margaret well educated. It was what he wished but could not obtain for her. Still, he did not give an immediate consent, but thanked his sister-in-law, and asked for a day or two to consider about it.

What was the end we know. Margaret went with her aunt and uncle, and for several years afterwards remained a member of their family, only spending one month out of each twelve under her father's roof.

People who live in villages, and are always busily employed in working for their bread, have not much time or inclination for writing. Many of our agricultural population, even in these days of popular education, are not learned enough to indite a letter or handle a pen. The village mechanic knows enough to enable him to keep his accounts, but finds the writing which his business obliges him to do quite enough after his day's toil. The farmer does not, as a rule, like letter-writing. He generally prefers mounting his horse and doing what he has to do by word of mouth, and so arranges to meet friends and customers at fairs and markets, that not many letters need pass between them.

I have heard a country postman say that, but for the parson, whose letters never failed, he should have come and gone to one of these quiet agricultural villages almost empty-handed on several occasions. Then the events of each day are so much alike with hard-working folk, that it is only now and then anything occurs remarkable enough to write about.

Birkdale boys, having the benefit of a Free School in their neighbourhood, were most of them able to read and write well; some, like Fred Robertson, were very fairly educated. George Robertson, too, had availed himself of those same privileges in his early days, and having had a wife of superior education in his Mar-

garet, he was very sensible of its value, and desired to bestow what he felt to be precious upon his children.

His second wife had received little teaching in early youth, but under Mrs. Raynor's kind care, and by her instruction, she had profited much. Still she had often felt that in after years few persons have the chance of making up for the deficiency of early training, and sensible of her own wants in this respect, she encouraged her husband to do his very utmost that their children might never experience the same.

After Maggie's departure from home she was not allowed to forget those whom she left behind. Her twin brother's letters were both frequent and affectionate. Her father also wrote at somewhat longer intervals, and sometimes her stepmother added a few lines, always expressive of deep interest in her welfare, and containing motherly advice. The letters of Fred and her father were always answered by Margaret, but to Ellen she never wrote directly. The reply to hers was always included in that to her father, and as Ellen saw her stepdaughter's writing change from the homely style taught at the village school to a delicate "lady's-hand," and the wording of her letters alter too, she shrank from continuing a correspondence with the young girl.

"Her messages to me seem so formal," thought Ellen. "They are in such '*set words*,' not as though she liked to send them. Then my writing looks so different from her own, or even from Fred's and her father's, when we all send a few lines, that I feel afraid she may ridicule my homely letters. Beside, I am not a really good speller either, and I shouldn't like my blunders to be laughed at. Yet I love Margaret. She is my good husband's daughter, and those dear to him must be dear to me. I feel I should like to whisper a word of advice in her ear sometimes, for young girls want other teaching beside what they get in schools."

Thoughts something like these passed through the father's mind also, and were especially present to him

when Margaret paid her annual visit. Aunt Pierson had been very unwilling for her to come then, for her niece was nearly twenty-one years of age, and she wished to make the occasion a little festival. Unless the visit were put off, Margaret would be at Birkdale on her birthday. But her father was also resolved that his twin children should be together, and Margaret came to Birkdale, her unwillingness being somewhat softened when her aunt arranged that her cousin Fanny should spend the same time at her uncle Martin's, so that the girls could go and return together.

When George Robertson first agreed to let Margaret go with the Piersons to the new farm, far away from Birkdale, he did not reckon on her staying with them after her school days were over. But when he proposed her return to her own home, he was ill prepared for the outcry that followed. To avoid its being said that he had allowed her to stay so long as it served his turn, and that he had taken her away as soon as Uncle Pierson ceased spending money upon her, and to silence the accusation of ingratitude raised against him when the subject was mentioned, Robertson suffered his daughter to grow up to womanhood at a distance from him. And now he regretted it. Yes—despite the schooling, “the bringing-up,” as Aunt Pierson called it, Robertson felt that he had made a mistake, and he said so to his wife and eldest son.

“My girl has been taught to do a good many things that will be useless to her,” he said; “not that her aunt has left her ignorant of household matters, for she is too good a manager for that, but still I can see that she has got what I call an ‘outside education.’ She has learned a little bit of a great many things, and none of them really well. But she *has* learned to be very proud, to be ashamed of her father’s home, of making herself useful in it, and I sometimes think of us too. Her mother’s ‘bringing-up’ produced different fruits. While she was better taught,

I mean in school learning, than Maggie, she was never ashamed of doing what was right and necessary. Her learning made her a good wife and mother; Maggie promises to be neither the one nor the other, for a girl that's ashamed of her father gives poor promise for the future."

"I think," said Ellen, "that Maggie's mother was what no earthly teaching would ever have made her, George. She was a good woman, 'taught of God,' knowing and feeling her own weakness, and led by Him to seek grace and help in time of need."

"Aye, Ellen, that is it after all. It isn't so much what my girl has learned, but what she has not learned."

"We must not blame earthly teachers for that, George. They can only use the means in their power. You know 'God giveth the increase.'"

"Yes, but I doubt, Ellen, whether the means have been used, whether the planting of the good seed or the watering of it has been thought about at all. I am afraid that in meaning to serve my child I have done her a great wrong. I should have considered that, whatever might be the worldly advantages offered by her aunt and uncle, there were things of far more consequence that ought to be weighed against these. And I cannot think *that* a right system of training that makes a girl ashamed to be useful in her father's home, fearful of soiling her fingers, when by so doing she could lighten the labour of another, or unwilling to own that her parent earns his bread by the sweat of his brow. Pride, false shame, want of natural affection—it cannot have been good seed that produced these fruits in my Maggie."

"She is young yet, father," interposed Fred, "and I think not quite so bad as you think. I do believe that under mother's teaching here, she would have had a better chance, but it isn't too late yet. Keep her at home now. She does love us, I'm sure, after all, only some people that I could mention have been taking a



deal of pains to spoil her, and turn an active-fingered lassie into a good-for-nothing fine lady. I was telling her yesterday that none of our Birkdale lads durst come a-wooing to her, for they would be frightened of taking a wife who was too grand for honest work, such as our mothers have to do."

"And Maggie! What did she say to your joke?"

"She looked as if she could be very angry indeed at any Birkdale lad who presumed to raise his eyes in her direction. But I told her my mind for all that, and said that a girl with no fortune to look to should be able to earn her own living if need were, or at any rate not despise those who did it honestly for themselves, and could do it for a wife if they took one. I said I didn't believe in anybody being idle, whatever their station, and that every sensible woman—to say nothing about Christian women—wished to be useful. Here comes grandfather, I hear his stick upon the gravel."

Fred was accustomed to call old James Richards by this name, partly because he really liked him, still more out of respect to his father's wife, who was indeed faithful in performing all a mother's duties to him, and who felt gratified at this adoption of her own aged parent by her stepson. Fred, sometimes a little abrupt and rough in speech, as his sister could testify, had yet much true delicacy, and rarely omitted any little courtesy which would give pleasure to another. Maggie would not have called old James Richards "grandfather" for the world, and had sharply rebuked her brother for claiming relationship with the old cottager who was nothing akin to them. But Fred's only retort would be a good-natured laugh, and the answer, "It pleases the kind old man, Maggie, and costs me nothing, because I really like him. Don't you understand that he must feel ever so much richer in having a big long-legged fellow like me to call him 'grandfather?'"

Now, as Fred heard the sound of his stick, it was

the signal for him to jump up and go to meet old James with a pleasant greeting, then to lead him in, and place the easiest chair in the warmest corner for his accommodation.

This kind of little scene was very common, for the old man was a frequent visitor, yet his daughter never saw it without feeling her heart beat more warmly towards her stepson, and an additional anxiety for his comfort and happiness. He was truly as dear to her as the children she had herself borne and nursed.

How different was the cold look and the colder greeting which old James received from Maggie, when she entered a few minutes after, having just returned from her Aunt Martin's, where she had taken tea! She was, if anything, more distant than usual, and old James, as he looked at her, thought, "What a pity, that so like her mother as she is in the face, she should be so unlike her in all beside. But George's first wife learned her lesson from a different book, that taught her to 'rise up before the hoary head, and honour the face of the old man.' The lad is his mother's own boy in all these things."

Margaret sat almost silent so long as old James stayed. Fred had inquiries enough to make about the welfare of the cows, whether the calf were sold; how Mary managed now? &c. &c., and listened with an interested look to every little thing that concerned "grandfather."

James, who suffered a good deal from rheumatism, was no longer able to go out regularly to work. But he was the possessor of a couple of good cows, and rented a little land which the interest of his son-in-law had been the means of obtaining for him. That first cow, purchased with a portion of Ellen's savings, George Robertson insisted should remain the property of the old man, as Mary Jones, with a little instruction, was quite able to look after the milking, &c.

James was, however, unwilling to keep so large a

part of Ellen's earnings, and managed to save as much as would have repaid her the price. But this neither husband nor wife would agree to, so another cow was purchased, and now, after the lapse of years, the little dairy was the main support of the cottage home, and old James comforted himself by thinking that there was a small sum entered in his name at the Savings' Bank, and that there was no chance of his being a burthen to his children.

"They've been good to me," he thought. "I always had a kind, dutiful daughter in my Ellen, and her marriage, without taking my child from me, gave me a son. How much I have to thank God for!"

The burthen of the old man's song was the same as that of Israel's Shepherd King. Having enough, he had not only learned to be therewith content, but, looking round his lowly dwelling, the sight of even his temporal blessings filled him with gratitude to the Giver of all good, and animated him with the same spirit which impelled David to cry in a transport of adoring thankfulness, "What shall I render unto the Lord for all His benefits toward me?"

James was fortunate, too, in his young housekeeper, who served him well and faithfully. The repentance of Mary Jones for the faults of which she had been guilty was deep and sincere, and the impression produced by the untimely death of little Willie Robertson did not wear away. Happily for the girl, she found a true friend in Ellen Robertson, who used her utmost endeavours to encourage Mary in a right course. Often, very often, did she look back upon the past with bitter self-upbraidings, and feel cast down at the thought that she should never again be trusted, she whose deceit and disobedience had caused the death of a little child. With poor Mary there was as yet no chance of "forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before." But the time did come when she was enabled to do so.

After the birth of Ellen Robertson's little boy, the second Willie, Mary always noticed with pain how unwilling the child's father was that she should be trusted with it for a moment. She spoke of this to Ellen. "O Mrs. Robertson," she said, "I couldn't tell you what I felt the other day when you were going to let me hold the baby, and his father stepped before me and took it in his arms. You see he has never really forgiven me. He can't trust me now, and yet I would sooner be killed myself than hurt the precious little thing. Nobody knows what I have suffered, and whenever master puts on that look it brings it all back again."

The girl wept bitterly, and Ellen hardly knew how to console her, because she was conscious of the truth of her conjectures. George Robertson never could bear to see Mary touch his child. She could but say, "Have patience, Mary. I cannot deny that George has a strong feeling in this matter, and his conduct just shows us that even when a fault is forgiven we yet continue to experience the effects of it for a long time, perhaps for life. As surely as we sow certain seeds do we reap the fruits of them. But I believe George will yet learn to trust you."

Mary was encouraged to hope, and Mrs. Robertson had a long talk with her husband on the subject. "I have forgiven the girl, Ellen," he said, "but somehow a feeling comes over me that I cannot describe when I see you offer to put baby in her arms."

"Will you try to conquer it, George? If we do indeed truly forgive, and have reason to think a person heartily sorry for having done us wrong, we should forgive by our actions as well as our words. We should give them the place they held before, and trust, even when we do not and cannot forget. Mary has heard you speak forgiveness to her, but sees you cannot trust her; and yet, my dear husband, I feel that she is more deserving of confidence now than she was before she committed that great sin. I should

not say this in most cases, but poor Mary has been so penitent, so earnest in seeking pardon from our Heavenly Father, and is now so doubtful of herself, and desirous of obtaining strength from the only true Source, that I cannot help feeling hers to have been that godly sorrow for sin which worketh repentance."

Mrs. Robertson's words were not unheeded by her husband, though he made no answer at the time. A few days afterwards, not being very busy, he asked Ellen to go with him to see an old friend who lived about two miles off. It was a lovely afternoon, and the walk would be pleasant, so Ellen hastened to finish her household duties, that she might accompany her husband. She was about to dress her baby, a fine sturdy fellow of six months old, when George interposed, "I was thinking of leaving the little one behind, for once, Ellen."

She looked up wonderingly, and said, "Where, George?"

"At your father's. Mary will take care of him till we come back."

He looked at Ellen with a smiling face. She made no answer, but rising from her seat thanked him with a true wife's loving kiss; then held up the little one that his rosy lips might touch his father's. Right heartily was the caress returned. Soon they left the house together, and went to the cottage of James Richards. The old man was from home, but Mary began to draw chairs forward for the visitors.

"You need not give us seats, Mary, we are not going to stay. My husband and I are off for a walk, and he wishes to leave our little boy with you till we come back."

The girl could hardly believe her ears, but when Robertson added, "Yes, Mary, I told Ellen we would leave our child with you for a few hours," her face lighted up with joy and gratitude for confidence restored.

Mrs. Robertson was going to pass the child to Mary,

but her husband taking the boy from her, himself placed it in the outstretched arms of the girl. Ellen felt all the true kindness of this little action, and her countenance showed how much it moved her. As to Mary, as her arms clasped the little creature, she burst into tears, glad tears they were, as she said, "Thank you, sir, for trusting me. I am so happy. I *will* take care of him."

George nodded kindly and replied, "I believe you, my girl," and, with a good-bye kiss to the youngster, he and his wife turned away and went on their walk.

It would be impossible to tell what happiness this little incident gave to Mary Jones, or how much the knowledge that she was trusted influenced her to try more and more to deserve confidence. During the years that followed, James Richards received from her almost a daughter's care, and the Robertsons reaped their reward likewise, in the devotion which Mary showed both to them and their children, though the thought of having encouraged and helped her in the right path would have more than recompensed Ellen for the pains she had bestowed.

When Margaret Robertson came home to spend her twenty-first birthday, Mary Jones, though still old James's housekeeper, was herself a wife and mother. She had married a respectable and steady young man, rather more than a year before, and as the cottage offered sufficient accommodation, it was arranged that she should retain her situation, and still care for her old master's comfort. Mary and her husband both felt this to be a great advantage, as it saved them the rent of a separate dwelling, and the wife had the pleasure of feeling that from the very beginning of their wedded life she contributed something towards the support of the home by her labour in it.

## CHAPTER XIV.

### A LINK BROKEN—FAMILY TALK.

"KEEP her at home." This had been Frederic Robertson's advice with regard to his twin sister, and it agreed with his father's opinion also. But it was easier to say than to do this now. The few days spent by the young girl beneath her father's roof had seemed quite sufficient, and she was already longing to be away from it; from the group of little ones who surrounded the hearth; and above all from the step-mother, whom she had been taught to look upon as an intruder, unworthy to fill the place once occupied by her own mother.

Somehow Margaret had got the idea that her father wished to prevent her return to Ashleybridge, and the large farm-house, which had now been her home for seven years. She told her aunt Martin so when she took tea with her on the afternoon alluded to, and complained bitterly of the prospect before her. Mrs. Martin smiled at her niece's fears, and reminded her that in the eye of the law she was now her own mistress, "or at least," she said, "in three days, Maggie, you'll be twenty-one, and can please yourself as to where you live."

This was going a step farther than Margaret had ever looked. Wayward, pettish, discontented, indifferent about home, and unwilling to share in its duties, cold and unloving towards her stepmother, Margaret had often shown herself. But she had never yet set herself in direct opposition to her father, whose affection she could not doubt, and who had

sacrificed his own wishes in order to promote her happiness. Then there was Fred, her twin brother, very dear to Margaret, even though he had always taken sides against herself in everything which related to her father and home. She could not love Fred any less on that account, perhaps because after all Maggie's conscience told her that Fred was right in his notions of filial duty, though *her* inclinations took a contrary direction.

But where conscience and inclination are at war, the latter too often comes off victorious. Then, in Margaret's case, there were plenty to second her wishes, when Robertson at length spoke plainly, and expressed his desire to have his daughter at home. Loud were the outcries, bitter the complaints, of Uncle and Aunt Pierson, when this was made known to them. Here they had been as father and mother to Margaret for seven years, she had been the same as their daughter to them, and now George wanted to take her away. Fanny cried, Aunt Martin shook her head with a look of great wisdom, and hinted that it was the easiest thing in the world to see who was at the bottom of it. Who had her hands full, and wanted Maggie to come and be a slave to *her* children? But she had told Maggie her opinion, and it was in the girl's own hands, &c. &c. &c.

Then Robertson became angry. He knew how truly his wife desired the real welfare of his eldest daughter, and how kindly she had ever judged his sisters-in-law, and he could ill bear that she, who had done her duty so faithfully, should be taunted or lightly spoken of by ill-natured and prejudiced tongues. So it came to this. Robertson plainly told his daughter that she might choose between her father and her aunt, that she knew his wish on the subject, but that if she went in opposition to it he should consider her choice final, and give himself no farther concern as to her movements. "Yet," he added, "no child can take such a course, and deliberately disobey



the reasonable commands of a father, without acting in opposition to the plain law of God, and having cause to repent it."

He left her, without any attempt at persuasion, or more gentle argument, in the hands of those who would use persuasions of every kind to destroy the effect of his few words. She was at the moment half inclined to follow him, but indignant voices cried that it was a shame she should be spoken to in such a manner, even by her father; that it was plain *who* had stirred George up in this manner, George who was mostly so quiet and reasonable; and that if Margaret gave in *now*, it would separate her from all her mother's kin, and condemn her to a life of drudgery amongst a pack of children.

"I little thought," sobbed Aunt Pierson, who had come from Ashleybridge on the first hint of the turn matters were taking at Birkdale, "I little thought that Pierson and me was giving her such a bringing-up as we gave Fanny, for her to be taken from our home to one like that. She'd never settle in it. How could she, poor thing! after what she's been used to at our house? She never did settle well at home after her own poor mother died, and was always pleased to be away, as you know, Hannah. A month was long enough for her to be at her father's, and, Maggie, *you know* how we counted the days till you were back again at Ashleybridge."

There was no denying all this. Maggie remembered quite well that, when Mary Jones was her father's housekeeper, home was very different from what her own good mother used to make it, and that it was very pleasant to get away to Aunt Pierson's farm or Aunt Martin's. Then her aunts had trained her to dislike her father's second wife, and to look upon Ellen—*once Aunt Martin's servant*—as entirely beneath her, until it seemed to the girl almost like a crime to yield a daughter's respect and obedience, to say nothing of affection, to her stepmother. Need

we wonder on which side the scale turned, or that Margaret was persuaded to return to Ashleybridge under the full conviction that, when her father's first feeling of displeasure had passed, he would not blame her much, or, at any rate, that he would soon forgive if he did not immediately forget this her earliest direct act of disobedience.

It was, however, no light trial for Margaret to part with her twin brother, especially as he strongly condemned her conduct, and would hardly listen to a proposal that he, too, should go to live at Ashleybridge.

"Uncle Pierson says, Fred, that in a large town like that, you could obtain excellent employment and far higher wages than you will ever be able to earn in a little bit of a village like Birkdale. You don't see the kind of work here that you would there, and it would improve you so much. I could see you, too, very often, and I'm sure Aunt Pierson would——"

"Aunt Pierson would want to have very little to say to me, Margaret. I have not had the 'bringing-up' to gratify her. She has made you and Fanny into fine ladies, at least so far as outsides go, and she likes to see you dressed in silks and muslins, too smart for *your* station, whatever they may be for her daughter. She wouldn't be very proud to own me, Maggie, in my working dress, when she drove in her own carriage to Ashleybridge."

"Who told you Aunt Pierson had a carriage?" asked Maggie.

"Those who told me still more about the style in which she lives than you ever did, sister Margaret. But it matters not talking. You have made up your mind to leave your father and your home—I say nothing of your twin brother—I have made up mine to stay with him, and, if it please God, to be a comfort and a help to him and mother."

"She's not your mother," responded Margaret haughtily.

"She has been all that the kindest mother could be to me, and I pray God to bless her, and help me to repay all her affection and tenderness. As to the dear children, our father's little ones, Margaret, they are just as precious to me as though the same mother had borne us all, and I never wish there was a single little mouth less to feed, though I own both father and I have to work harder than we used to do."

Margaret was about to speak, but Fred again continued—

"It's of no use trying to persuade me, Maggie. I cannot see with your eyes. I get my queer notions, as you have often called them, from a book which mother taught me to go to whenever I wanted to know what path to take. If I read it rightly I feel that my first duty—next to that which I owe to God"—the young man spoke with earnestness and reverence—"is to my father. So long as he needs my presence and help he shall have them. With respect to yourself, dear sister, I believe the time will come when you will know him and mother as your best earthly friends, and will be glad of the shelter of the roof you now despise."

Fred gave his sister no opportunity of answering this straightforward speech, but left her, as soon as it was ended, to digest his counsel as best she might.

Robertson parted with his daughter kindly, but calmly. Not a word did he say about her returning even for a visit to his home. The girl's tears were abundant enough, so were those of Ellen, who whispered as she bade her farewell, "Margaret, you may want to come back to us. If you do, send me a line. I will do my best to make things right between you and your father, and I would give you a mother's welcome as I have ever striven to do. May God bless and keep you."

Frederic also whispered something when they parted which brought a bright flush, half glad, half angry, to Margaret's face, but she turned her head

away to hide it. The train started, and bore the girl, her aunt, and cousin away from Birkdale.

Though Robertson had spoken curtly to Margaret, though he had parted with her almost sternly, and not permitted her to see any signs of deeper feeling—yet such a feeling did exist. She was so like her dead mother, that faithful, loving wife, on whose memory he looked with earnest tenderness after the lapse of all these years. The loss had been made up to him. In Ellen he had a partner as faithful, as loving. And yet he never could recall the remembrance of her who had been so suddenly taken away without recalling also the shock it caused him, and making him more tender towards her children. Now that his daughter was gone the suppressed pain broke forth. "Ellen," he said, "I am half afraid I spoke too harshly to the girl. If, instead of just telling her to take her choice, I had said how much we have thought of her for seven years past, how much we wished to have her with us, so that our little family band might have no link missing, and how we loved her, I think she could not have left us for all the aunts in the world. How like her mother she looked!"

Ellen's tears flowed in sympathy; for she saw her husband's eyes become moist, though he leaned his head on his hand to hide them. "She is too much like her mother in all outside things, George, to be quite unlike her in others. She is young now, and easily led, but I fancy, especially from something Fred has told me, that some day we shall have her with us."

"What is it, Fred?" asked the father, raising his head with an eager look.

"I have heard, father, that Uncle Pierson may not be able to provide for Maggie, or indeed for anybody, in the way he has lately done. It seems the property that was left to him was not clear. There was a mortgage on it which the former owner was very anxious to pay off, and, if he had lived a few years

longer, he might have managed it. But they *do* say that Uncle Pierson was thrown a good deal amongst richer people than himself when he went to Ashley-bridge, and that Aunt, who had been a great body you know in Birkdale, where there are only small farmers, was not content to look any less than her neighbours there. So, instead of the mortgage being paid off, it has been greatly increased, for Uncle Pierson has been living above his income, and instead of being a rich man is really straitened for money."

"How did you hear this, Fred?"

"From Charles Murray, father. But remember it must not be mentioned again. I was told in confidence, but Charles said he should not object to my telling you and mother, as he was well convinced it would go no further."

"Indeed, it shall not. Far be it from us to spread evil tidings. I sincerely hope they may not be true. I should not like my girl to be driven home through the misfortune of her relations, though I should welcome her with open arms if she came asking me to give her a daughter's place again. I feel that I could not turn away from the child that brings her mother's face before me in her own."

"I could hardly think your heart and words went together, father, when you spoke coldly to Maggie," said Fred.

"They did at the moment, my boy, but now I come to look into it I find my heart much softer than my words. It yearns after the daughter who has turned her back upon us all."

"I am like Fred," said Mrs. Robertson. "I think we shall have her with us again. The answer to our prayers will come, though we have to wait for it."

There was a brief silence which Robertson broke by asking whether Charles Murray were in any situation.

"Yes, father," returned Fred. "He has got one

as book-keeper in a very good house in Wolftown. He began his work there this morning only."

"That lad will get on," said Robertson. "He deserves it, for he was a dutiful son. Didn't he go to school with you, Fred?"

"Yes, father, but only for a little while. He was near about leaving when I entered, and he stood at the head of the school. Our head master was anxious that he should not go home to his parents, but turn his education to account in another way."

"I remember all about it. The lad's father fell from a stack, broke his leg, and got otherwise hurt, and Charles left school and worked like a man to supply his place. Murray never got really strong again, and his wife was an ailing body too. They are both gone now."

"I can tell you, father, that Charles Murray's example did me good. You know Murray was but a working man, as one may say, though he had a little cottage farm of half a dozen acres; but Charles never liked agricultural labour, and always strove to fit himself for something higher. However, when he saw that he could best help his parents by taking the management of things while the old man was ill, he buckled to as if he had never had another thought. Still, he took care not to forget what he had learned in Wolftown Free School, though he had to work early and late to keep up to the mark, and when both his parents were dead, and no longer needed his help, he tried for other employment. He had a situation at Ashleybridge, only a poor one, with plenty of work and little salary, but it has proved a step to a better. His income now will be a very comfortable one, and he has a prospect of a gradual rise."

"Do you think he met Margaret at Ashleybridge sometimes, Fred?" inquired Mrs. Robertson, as though a new light had broken upon her.

Fred laughed. "Ah, mother, I see you want to know all about it, and I don't know who has a better right

than you and father. Charles will not mind, I'm sure. He knew Maggie as a little lassie at home, and used to see her when she came to spend her month with us once a year. That was while he was doing a labouring man's work here at Birkdale, and our Maggie, who is far too much of a fine lady to look beyond fine feathers, only saw Charles's homely dress and humble work. She did not understand how he had overcome his inclinations for the sake of his duty to his parents. If she had, I hardly think she would have understood his motives. She did not know either that his working coat hid a better scholar than any other lad in Birkdale. Beside, it wasn't a good son and a worthy lad that Maggie looked for, but somebody who could keep her in a fine house, and deck her out in silk."

"Fred, aren't you using strong words about your sister?" interposed Ellen, whose loving heart rebelled against even apparent harshness towards the absent daughter.

"Dear mother, I am only just telling the plain truth. We know too well how poor Maggie judges of people's worth, but I live in hope that she will change. Let me finish my tale, though. I am convinced it was for the sake of being near my sister that Charles Murray sought and obtained employment at Ashleybridge, but he was not grand enough to visit at Uncle Pierson's, as you may think, so he seldom saw Margaret. When they did meet by any chance, Maggie was condescending enough to speak civilly, and so on, but she took care to keep poor Charles in his place, and let him know that though the cottager's son might count the carpenter's daughter as one of his neighbours here, in our little village, the poor clerk must not raise his eyes towards Miss Robertson, the niece of a landed proprietor, and one who visited with all the great folks of Ashleybridge. Charles took care not to let Maggie know of his changed prospects when he met her lately

here, or perhaps he might have been differently received."

"Why, did he——?" Robertson commenced a question, and stopped as if hardly knowing how to shape it.

"He did offer her a share in an honest man's home, father, and the first place in his heart; more to blame he, I think, for she could not value them as they deserved to be prized. It is well for him that she did not accept them, for I should not like my sister to make worthy Charles Murray miserable."

"Fred, Fred, you are too bad. You put your old schoolfellow before your sister."

"Father, I do believe that if Margaret had accepted Charles Murray's offer in the present state of her feelings, with her love of outside show, and valuing so lightly far better things—and she might have done it had she known of his improved prospects—she would have made a worthy man a poor wife. If a woman looks with scorn on a homely coat, and can spare no respect for the warm, honest heart it covers; if she measures her chances of wedded happiness only by the amount of the man's income, and esteems his Christian character as not worth a thought, why——"

"There's no mistake about it, Fred. The man is lucky who misses such a girl, and the offering himself to her is as casting pearls before swine."

"Now, mother, who uses strong words?" asked Fred, laughing. Then he added, "Mind, I wouldn't say that a woman should marry even a good man who has not the means of finding bread for himself, much less for a wife, and children, if they should come. That is rashness—nay, I think it almost amounts to sin; but—but there are many different ways of doing things, and Charley Murray did not deserve to be treated as if he had committed an offence in looking at Maggie."

"I could have wished nothing better for your sister than that so worthy a young man should seek her



as his wife. But that is ended, of course," said Robertson.

"I'm not so sure of that, father. I believe Maggie had a sort of lurking feeling in favour of Charles, and before she left Birkdale began to think she was leaving something behind of more value than the fine feathers that make fine birds. He's not one of the changeable sort; and who knows? If the news about Uncle Pierson's affairs be true, and Maggie should have to come back to us, who can tell, but under mother's good training and by God's blessing, my sister may change so much as to be worthy of what she does not *now* know the worth of?"

Who indeed could tell? The three speakers were full of anxious thoughts and cares for the sister and daughter who had willingly, as it seemed, gone out from amongst them, to cast in her lot with others, near and dear to her no doubt, but still less near than those from whom she had separated herself. Into her future they could not look. That was in the hands of the Lord. They could but wait patiently and prayerfully, and leave all to their Heavenly Father's care and guidance.

## CHAPTER XV.

### TROUBLES AT UNCLE PIERSON'S.

THE report which, through young Murray, had reached the ears of George Robertson and his wife proved to be a correct one, though it was several months before the affair became known in Birkdale, or even Ashleybridge.

Matters were really worse with Uncle Pierson than any person had an idea of. The notion had got abroad, nobody knew how, that he was sometimes put about for money, but Aunt Pierson, her daughter, and niece, were not in the secret. Somehow, for a good while past, the farmer had said very little about his affairs to his wife, and she, with her easy temper, was perfectly satisfied to think everything was going on well so long as there was no stint in the household. Visitors were entertained in right hospitable style, for there is always abundance of good cheer in a large farm-house without going beyond the limits of the farm itself. Aunt Pierson's purse was always well replenished by the sale of such dairy produce, &c., as formed her especial perquisites, and the good dame shone in rich, gay-coloured, substantial silks, while the younger ones had wardrobes equally well stocked from the same source.

But at length the easy-going mistress of this abode of seeming plenty became conscious of a change in her husband.

He looked thinner, his ruddy face lost much of its colour, and his brow, formerly open and cheery,

became clouded and careworn. Even the girls, Fanny and Margaret, began to observe and wonder at the alteration, but neither they nor his wife ever for a moment guessed the cause until the storm burst upon them. It came in this wise.

Mrs. Pierson, her daughter, and niece, were in deep consultation with the dressmaker, respecting sundry articles of summer clothing just purchased, when Fanny, glancing from the window, exclaimed, "Here is young Woodward just coming. I wonder what brings him at this time of day." At the same moment a conscious look seemed to say that she knew quite well what was the young man's errand.

Young Woodward was the nephew and articled clerk of Mr. Royle, Uncle Pierson's lawyer, and no unfrequent visitor at the house, though he generally came later in the evening. Perhaps these visits had been the cause of some day-dreams to Fanny Pierson, for the sound of his step would bring a brighter colour to her already rosy cheek, and perhaps, too, they might have had something to do with the refusal of another suitor for her hand. This was Henry Martin, her eldest cousin, whose rejection had greatly angered his mother, and caused the first coolness which had ever arisen between her and her sister.

To do the latter justice she did not wish to quarrel, but Aunt Martin, who had prided herself on the improved worldly position of sister Pierson, and had shone with increased lustre in the eyes of Birkdale people owing to her near kindred with folk who were said to be wealthy, now changed her tone, hinted that after all it was best to be just moderately fixed, that pride might have a fall, and that increased means only brought increased cares, &c. &c.

Fanny Pierson watched young Woodward's approach unseen by him, and at the same time hastily resumed the dress which she had taken off, to have the new one tried on, expecting every moment that the servant would come to tell her mistress that he

wished to see them. But young Woodward entered, and a quarter of an hour passed without their hearing any more of the visitor. Then, Uncle Pierson himself came, and in an impatient voice called his wife. "Jane, I want you."

Mrs. Pierson obeyed the summons, and when she observed her husband's face a sense of approaching trouble came over her, as she said, "like a cloud." Something was amiss, she thought, and his words confirmed it. "Jane, what money have you?"

She took out her purse and counted. "About fourteen pounds. Stay, I have a five-pound note in my drawer."

"Is that all? I thought you told me a few days since that you had twice that."

"So I had; but we were at Ashleybridge yesterday, and I bought the girls and myself some little matters we wanted for the summer."

With an angry exclamation, and an utter condemnation of their love of finery, he dashed the purse, which his wife had placed in his hand, on the floor and rushed down-stairs again. A few moments afterwards Fanny saw young Woodward leave the house. His call had evidently been a mere business one, and not made for the sake of seeing her.

The dressmaker went away also, taking with her the gowns she had just tried on, and then Fanny stepped into her mother's bedroom, where her father had been in conversation with his wife, in order to find out the nature of Mr. William Woodward's business.

To her surprise and alarm Mrs. Pierson was sitting white and trembling, her hands dropped in a helpless fashion on her lap, and that well-known purse, so often opened to supply either the real or fancied wants of Margaret and herself, lying on the floor and the money scattered about on the carpet.

"Mother, dear, what is the matter? Are you ill? Where is father? What did Mr. Woodward come for?"

These questions were poured out one after another in rapid succession and in a tone of real alarm.

"O child, I hardly know what ails me. Something has put your father out sadly; but I know no more than you what it is. He frightened me dreadfully."

She leaned her head on her daughter's breast and burst into tears. Margaret entered at the moment, and was not a little alarmed at the sight of her aunt weeping and Fanny's troubled face. As soon as she could master her emotion sufficiently, Mrs. Pierson told them what had occurred, and begged Margaret to seek her uncle, and try to find out the cause of his strange agitation.

The girl obeyed instantly. But her search was vain. She found no one in the room where he had been, and was told by the servants that Mr. Pierson left the house by the back door almost directly after the young gentleman went out at the front.

Two hours of sadness and suspense followed, during which Mrs. Pierson, Fanny, and Margaret imagined all sorts of misfortunes, likely and unlikely, as the cause of the farmer's strange conduct. His anxious manner, his altered looks, which had troubled them of late, little things, which had seemed scarcely worth noticing at the time when they happened, now assumed importance in their eyes. Indeed, so completely were they unnerved by the dread of overhanging misfortune to which they could give no real shape, that the fear of it carried them far beyond what its actual presence would have done. When, however, after the lapse of two hours, the farmer returned, pale, and evidently worried by this hidden trouble, yet no longer angry, the relief which the very sight of him—at least alive and safe—brought to their minds was so great, that it found vent in tears with all the three.

"Jane, girls, what is it? What are you all crying for?" asked the farmer. "Surely, wife, a few hasty words have not done this?"

"You seemed so angry, Robert, and going out as

you did frightened us. When we saw you back we were so glad and thankful we could not help crying."

Well, dry away the tears. I am sorry I spoke so crossly, Jane, and troubled you and these silly lasses. I was vexed at something, never mind what: so let us try to forget all this."

Mrs. Pierson saw that he did not wish to be questioned then, so she dried her tears, and tried to look and speak cheerfully. But the cloud hung over them all still, and the tea was little relished by any of the family party that evening.

After tea, Fanny and Margaret left the room in obedience to a hint from Mrs. Pierson. When they were gone, she said, "Robert, do you want this bit of money? Take it if it will be of any use. I felt so sorry I had spent some; but if you had said one word before——"

"I know, Jane, I know. I could have bitten my tongue the minute after I had spoken in such a way to you, good wife. I don't want it now, though if you had had more, it might have been useful just at that moment, and I could have paid you again."

"Robert, you need not have paid it back to me," said Mrs. Pierson.

"Well, I shall manage now. I have sold some fat stock to Cleaver and Hedge, the butchers, at Ashleybridge, and they are sure to pay me down on the nail. They will fetch the beasts to-night."

Aunt Pierson looked more and more frightened at these words, spoken in a careless tone. The stock sold when the market was rising, and her husband had said how well it would pay him to hold back his cattle! Sold too, in such haste, to people noted for driving a hard bargain, and to be fetched and paid for then and there! There was something beyond all this which she could not understand, and her husband's manner said, plainly as words, that he did not want to be questioned.

There was silence for a time, but the poor woman

felt that any misfortune would be easier to bear than this suspense and wearing anxiety. "Robert," she said, timidly, "don't be angry at my asking, but I should like to know what young Woodward came for, and if he had anything to do with your——" She stopped, hardly knowing how to frame her words into the least irritating shape, and dreading lest her husband should again give way to temper.

But he finished the sentence. "With my being put out, and using such cross words to you, Jane, I suppose you would say. It would be better for you not to question me at present, but I may just say this: it was young Woodward's coming for some money I had to pay his uncle which vexed me, for I was not quite prepared. I could have managed, if you had had what you mentioned the other day. When I came up-stairs to ask you for it, I forgot that you and the girls had been to Ashleybridge in the meantime, and that you never can pass a draper's shop without stopping to lighten your purses. I had told the young man I would fetch him the rest of the money, and I felt so put out of the way at having to go back and tell him I hadn't it, that you know how I behaved."

"Couldn't you have given him a cheque, Robert?"

(Uncle Pierson, in the early days of his changed position, had been rather fond of showing that he had cash lying at Ashleybridge Bank. It had seemed very pleasant to turn a piece of paper into so much money, by merely writing a few words and figures and signing his name.)

This last question irritated the farmer; for a true answer must involve an unpleasant confession.

"Really, Jane," he said; "I wish you would not bother any more about this matter. Don't you see I want to be quiet? If it had suited me to write a cheque, I should have done it."

He turned away with an impatient movement, and taking up the newspaper, began to look over the

markets. But there are times when the usually passive, yielding woman seems to collect all the energy which others expend in daily life, to meet a sudden demand.

It was so now with Mrs. Pierson. She guessed much; she must know more, feeling she could not endure her present state of anxious foreboding. Rising from her seat, she laid her hand on her husband's arm. "Robert," she said, "there is some trouble hanging over us, of what kind I cannot tell, but I do beg you'll let me know. I'm not much of a scholar, or a clever woman, like sister Martin, but, Robert, I've always been a true wife to you. If you have any trouble, who ought to share it if I don't? Who can feel for you as I can? Tell me, Robert."

The poor woman's eyes and heart were full, and a little sob, which she tried to smother, broke from her, and sounded more like a reproach than bitter words would have done on her husband's ear. He put down his newspaper, and laid the hand which before held it upon that of his wife, while he looked sadly in her face.

"Jane, you *have* been a good wife. You're worth a thousand of your sister Martin, though you always set her up as if she were above you. You ought to know this trouble, for there is one, and I have been keeping it from you for your own sake. I'm afraid I've done wrong."

Mrs. Pierson's tears flowed freely and dropped on her husband's hand. His words, though confirming her fears, yet gave her comfort, for they were kind, and promised confidence.

Farmer Pierson waited a little to recover himself, and then told his tale. It was nothing less than ruin which stared them in the face. It needs not to go into particulars. They had begun badly when they came to Ashleybridge, by living at the top of their income, and doing nothing towards paying off what was really only a small mortgage on the property.



Then they had got beyond their income, the mortgage had been increased, the farmer had been induced to speculate in what he did not understand, and, with a view to repair his losses, had only plunged deeper in debt and difficulty. He had persisted in hiding all this from his wife, who knew nothing of their affairs, but supposed all was right; and he continued to live in the same style to prevent others from suspecting his real position. He was in arrears with the interest of the now heavy mortgage, and it was about that that young Woodward came, with an intimation that, unless it were paid, the principal would be called in. Instead of having a good balance at the bank, as of old, he owed money there too, and at that moment was not sure that the sacrifice of everything he possessed would pay the demands against him.

Such was the story to which Mrs. Pierson had to listen. When it was ended, she said not a reproachful word, though it was far, far worse than she could have expected. Her only remark was, "Robert, I wish you had told me when you first got wrong. I could have done a good deal to prevent things getting so bad. As it is, I have helped to it by keeping more company and dressing finer than we could afford, instead of saving."

There was something very touching in these simple words, calmly said, though the poor woman's heart was throbbing so that its every beat was audible. It was very touching to hear her thus taking to herself a share of blame for having been guilty of lavish expense, though she was ignorant of the need for economy. But she wished, by lifting a share of the burthen, to lighten her husband's load.

"I wish I had told you, Jane. I feel that I have done wrong in keeping secrets from a good wife. Here you would take blame on yourself, when you deserve none. But I will take care no one else lays it upon you, for every one shall know that my wife had neither part nor lot in bringing me to this pass.

If I have done the wrong, I will bear the blame alone, Jane."

"Never mind thinking about that, Robert. I wish I only knew how to help you now. What is to be done?"

Aye, what was to be done? No easy question to answer, for truly farmer Pierson knew not which way to turn, or from what quarter the storm would break, it threatened him in so many. In spite of his trouble, he could not help feeling thankful that his wife knew all. His load had been so much heavier from having it to bear in silence. Now, at any rate, he was sure of sympathy. And how well she had borne it! If it had been her sister Martin, he knew well what a storm would have followed,—what bitter reproaches,—what biting taunts! He had expected tears and lamentations; for Aunt Pierson was at times apt to grieve over trifles, and to take a sorrowful view of little trials. He had known her fret for a whole day over a burnt hole in a carpet, or a grease spot caused by a careless neighbour at dinner, even on a turned silk dress. And now, within sight of utter ruin, so far as worldly things went, how brave she was! how patient! how comforting! He could see how deeply she felt this trial, but less for herself than for him and "those poor girls," as she called Fanny and Margaret.

Farmer Pierson pondered on all these things, and said to himself that there were depths of character in his wife, which five-and-twenty years' companionship had never shown him. Her life had been as the day of small things hitherto, and she had seemed, both to her husband and others, a simple body, easy-tempered and peace-loving, as a rule, only sometimes rather unreasonable, as a child might be, in regard to trifles. She had shown herself most obstinate with regard to keeping her niece, even in opposition to the will of the girl's father, and excused herself and quieted conscience—which asked if in that case she were doing to another as she would wish to be done by—with the

plea that she was acting with a desire to benefit the child of her dead sister. And not being a religious woman, this excuse had quieted the inward accuser.

But now Mrs. Pierson was showing a new side of her character, and her husband, as he saw her in this fresh light, thought there was after all a gleam of brightness to be discerned through the dark cloud which was hanging low over his head. Not that he regarded the cloud itself with any less apprehension. On the contrary, the very thought of his want of confidence in his wife caused bitter self-reproach, and the misfortune which she must share, without having helped, at least knowingly, to cause it, seemed doubly heavy because he could not bear it alone. Wife, child, aye, and niece, too, were so knit with him, that they must suffer if he suffered, and what was there but ruin before them all?

Farmer Pierson's thoughts were of a very painful description, as he sat in the gathering twilight. He was alone, for, at his request, his wife had sought the girls to tell them all he had told her. He listened, painfully enough, for every sound, half expecting to hear some wail of sorrow and dismay. The very play of the summer wind amongst the shrubs—he could hear it through the half-opened window—came to him like the echo of a sob. If he could have seen the three who were in the room just over his head, he would have wondered that no impatient cry, no bitter flood of tears came, even from his quick-tempered daughter. There were pale faces, on which the news they had just heard had written its terrible story. But the mother's calmness, her quiet, patient fashion of telling what was hanging over them all, restrained the girls from any noisy manifestation of feeling.

"For fear of increasing father's trouble." This she urged upon Fanny and Margaret, as a reason for them also to be calm. "I can see," said Mrs. Pierson, "how he suffers, both in mind and body. He has done that for some time past, as we have all noticed,

though we never could have guessed the reason. And now, I am sure, he is thinking far more about you girls and me than he is about himself. Let us show that we think more about him than we do about ourselves. If we seem not to make a great trouble of this, he will think it is less. We must do our best to comfort father."

In speaking of her husband to others, Mrs. Pierson generally called him "father," except to the servants. To them he was named as "master." Just as she had ended her story and subsequent advice, and the girls had promised to follow it, she saw one of the men approaching the house, and Hedge, the butcher from Ashleybridge, along with him. "I must go down," she said, "and speak to Hedge."

Mrs. Pierson accordingly met the tradesman at the door. She knew he would expect to be invited in, and entertained, and she felt that her husband was unfit to receive him. She therefore asked him into a little room distant from that where Pierson was sitting, told the servant to bring some refreshments, and bade Hedge help himself. "You'll excuse the master, Hedge," she said. "He is not very well to-night. I suppose you have come about the beasts."

"Yes, ma'am. It is rather late, but Mr. Pierson so particularly wished them to be fetched to-night, and I don't mind telling the truth, we are glad to get hold of a little good stuff to go on with, for markets are terrible trying for buyers just now."

"I suppose so. I rather wondered at master selling at this time, Hedge."

"And so, to say the truth, did I, ma'am. But you see the stock is in prime condition, just ready for our hands, and it seems the master wanted to get them off his, I suppose to make room for more. It would be an object to a little farmer to keep them, and make a trifle extra, but Mr. Pierson is different, and there is such a thing as over-holding."

"My husband got bitten a little by keeping his

corn too long awhile since, Hedge. He made three shillings a quarter less than he would have done by selling a fortnight earlier."

"Ay, the markets fell very suddenly, and there were some that fared a deal worse than Mr. Pierson. No doubt that little mistake has made him cautious. I hope the stock-market won't drop now, or *we* shall have made a mistake," continued Hedge, pulling out his canvas purse as he spoke, and beginning to count out the price of the beasts.

Mrs. Pierson went to her husband, who gave her a receipt for the amount, which she exchanged with the butcher for a little pile of notes and gold. Then Hedge took his departure, and the farmer's wife carried the money to her husband.

Pierson was very anxious to know whether Hedge appeared surprised at the transaction, or whether his conversation showed that he suspected want of money to be the cause of this sudden sale. To satisfy him, his wife repeated, word for word, all that had passed, and then said, "Robert, you had better go to bed and rest now. You look tired, and flushed too."

"Yes, I will go to bed, Jane. This," he continued, holding up the money, "will get me time to look round, and think what is best to be done. We'll talk matters over to-morrow. I'm so glad Hedge did not seem suspicious. That shows there is no gossip abroad as yet. Where are the girls? Have you told them?"

"Yes, Robert. You will find they'll help to comfort you." She called Fanny and Margaret to come and bid father good night, which they did. The twilight was deepening as they entered, and there was no candle to show their pale faces, so he could not read the terror-stricken look there. He only heard a little trembling of their voices, and felt that, as they kissed him, the caress was warmer, and the pressure of their arms round his neck closer than common.

As the farmer rose from his seat, he staggered a

little. "I feel quite giddy, Jane," he said. "My head too is hot and stupid. I rode hard when I was out this afternoon, and the heat has been almost too much for me. I'm glad I tasted nothing but a cup of tea, or I should have blamed myself for it." He went up-stairs, his wife with him, and once in his bedroom, appeared much better. She had some little matters to attend to, so she left him, saying she would soon be back, and would bring with her a little cooling herb drink.

The night was lovely. The moon rising in the east showed the farmer the trees, glittering with dew, whose leaves pressed the window-panes. He could see the pretty garden, and beyond it, the fields where the white sheep were grazing, and others where the newly-mown grass lay in swathes, or the tall, green corn waved gently in the breeze. A few years back, garden, pasture, and corn fields were all counted to be his own. They were nearly so, and a little economy would have secured them to him and his.

And now, how different was the prospect! As farmer Pierson looked into the future, he seemed to see all vanish from him, or, though house and fields might be there, he imagined another master in his place, and other faces gathered round the hearth, which his wife believed—until a few hours ago—to be their home for life. Often had farmer Pierson been haunted by strange dreams and nightmare after spending the evening in entertaining his acquaintances too freely; often had it been a relief to wake and find there was nothing real in the vision which came during sleep; but now, this waking glance into the future was worse than he had ever dreamed. Then, if he looked back, the past brought nothing but self-reproach, and especially with regard to his wife and daughter, and Margaret Robertson, who was hardly less dear to her uncle.

"Poor things! I have done them a great wrong; but I will bear the blame. and I will do my best for

them yet. The farm must go ; but if I can get time I'll begin afresh. Somebody—old Tomline who holds the mortgage—*may* perhaps let me stay as tenant, and by care and economy we may get our heads above water. Wife and girls will help. Oh ! how foolish I have been towards them ! But I must get to bed ; my head turns round and round, and no wonder."

It had often happened that farmer Pierson's head had been anything but clear when he lay down to rest, but from a different cause. Then, he had felt no remorse at throwing himself on his bed without lifting up his voice even, much less his heart, in prayer. It was otherwise to-night. He must try to collect his wandering ideas, he must try to pray. A consciousness that he had been trying to walk upright in his own strength alone all his life through, and that he had failed miserably, made him anxious to obtain other and better help. He hardly knew how to go about it ; for, somehow, a consciousness came upon him that real prayer, the outpouring of a hungry and thirsty soul, longing for the blessings which it craves, was very different from the few words, always carelessly repeated, if said at all, which he was in the habit of using. Then he thought of the text he had heard on the preceding Sunday morning. He went to church regularly enough always. But he knew that his head was often heavy, for neighbours would pop in on Saturday night more frequently even than on other evenings, and they sat over their pipes, &c., later because the morrow was Sunday, and they would not need to rise early and ride out amongst their labourers as they did on other days. He had a sort of dim notion that this was not exactly a fitting preparation for the Lord's-day, but it was the custom thereabouts, and he consoled himself by thinking that he was no worse than his neighbours. To be sure he always had a heavy head on the Sunday morning, in spite of two extra hours in bed, and breakfast so late that there was but just a possibility of getting to

church by the time the choir, in accordance with long established custom, had finished singing "I will arise." And then what followed? The various changes in the services sufficed to keep his drowsiness from merging into sleep, but after the text was given out, and he had settled himself into a snug corner of his well-cushioned pew, he seldom heard anything.

The text of the preceding Sunday, "Cast thy burden upon the Lord, and He shall sustain thee: He shall never suffer the righteous to be moved," had fallen upon his ear. He had been unable to keep worldly thoughts and cares out of his mind on that day. Though not suffering from anxiety on account of sin committed, time misspent, or talents wasted, he had yet carried *his* burden into the house of God.

We know what the burden was. It was pressing him sorely, and when he heard those words he did not think what *they* referred to. He only considered how pleasant it would be if he could cast his burden on any other shoulders, so that he only got rid of it. He thought he would listen to *that* sermon, which a stranger was going to preach; but his head was too heavy. He settled himself comfortably in his accustomed nook, and the next he remembered was the being roused by the rustle of the silken dresses of his wife and daughter as they rose with the rest of the congregation at the conclusion of the sermon. He was sorry it was so. He might have learned something of the way to get rid of his load, he thought, but now he remembered only the words, and though there was a promise in the verse it was addressed to "the righteous," and he dared not take it to himself.

These thoughts were not long in passing through farmer Pierson's mind. They all came during the few moments that he sat by the bedside trying to gather courage to kneel and pray, wishing he knew in what way to make known his requests unto God, and resolving what he would do for the future.

But man proposes and God disposes.



## CHAPTER XVI.

### A SUDDEN SUMMONS.

MRS. PIERSON lingered down-stairs no longer than was necessary to prepare the cooling drink for her husband and to give her orders for the morrow. The girls would have had her stay to talk over things with them—to help them to realize their present position, and plan for the future; but she resolutely refused.

"I must go directly, dears. Father is not well, and I want him to get to sleep. He is sure to feel restless enough, and if I were to go up-stairs later, I might disturb him. Beside, there are two of you, and you must try to think and plan together. Only remember, not a bit of noise to disturb father." The last words were spoken in a whisper, and so was the "good night," a wish none of them thought would be fulfilled, for peaceful rest with such disturbed minds was out of the question both to old and young.

Mrs. Pierson's step was on the stairs, the girls were close behind, when, in a moment, they heard the fall of some heavy body overhead. It was no article of furniture, that would have caused a sort of crash, but a dull, weighty sound, which made their hearts throb with a terrible fear.

"Father must have fallen," exclaimed Mrs. Pierson, and hastily passing the cooling drink into Margaret's hand she rushed up-stairs, the girls following as rapidly as they could. They entered the room, and found the farmer extended on the floor, while his livid face and heavy breathing told a pitiful tale.

He was quite unconscious, and it was plain that he was in a fit. The servants were summoned: one was despatched to Ashleybridge for a doctor, while the rest raised their insensible master, and placed him on his bed. Mrs. Pierson bade the girls get cold water and apply wet bandages to his forehead, and herself used such simple means as were within her reach in the hope of restoring consciousness, but in vain. Very anxiously did they listen for the first sound of a horse's feet, hoping that the arrival of the doctor would bring relief; and the two girls, utterly broken down at this calamity, sobbed in unison.

"Mother," asked Fanny, "what do you think it is?"

"I cannot tell, but I fear it is an apoplectic fit."

The answer, though they expected it, had a fearful sound to Fanny and Margaret. Both remembered what they had often heard, that farmer Pierson's father died from apoplexy.

"Uncle has never had a fit before, aunt, has he?" inquired Margaret, her voice fairly quivering as she spoke.

"No; and *his* father had more than one. I believe it was the third attack that carried him off."

There was hope in this answer, bad as things were; and with the thought that the poor sufferer might be restored to health, other trials were made light in comparison. The arrival of the surgeon, however, destroyed these new-born hopes.

"The attack is an uncommonly severe one," he said. "I have not thought Mr. Pierson well for some time past. Both mind and body seem to have been out of order, and though it is bad enough when there is only the latter kind of ailment, it is far worse when the two are combined. I will do what I can, but I am sadly afraid that will be but little."

These words sounded to the hearers like a sentence of death against one so near and dear. Such, alas! it proved. All their efforts were useless. The surgeon used such means as his skill suggested;

a physician was summoned in the hope that the two medical men might consult together, and stay the approach of death, by efforts which did not come within the experience of the one. But, when they met, the second could only confirm what the first had said; the patient never became conscious, and a few hours ended even the frail hope which clings to the watchers by a sick bed so long as the faintest sign of life remains.

It would be difficult to describe the grief and consternation at the farm when its master was so suddenly called away. Nay, only those who have suffered under a combination of troubles can imagine the state of mind in which Mrs. Pierson, her daughter and niece, turned away from that death-bed when all was over. It was so terrible to think of the various circumstances which had followed each other so rapidly, all within quite a few hours. First, the sudden change from prosperity, for the women of the family never suspected that it was unreal, and that the plenty that surrounded them might at any moment give place to penury—to poverty; then sickness; then, without time for even a single farewell word, came death. And, worst thought of all, those who were left behind, themselves, alas! careless in the day of prosperity respecting eternal things, durst not take to themselves the best consolation, that of feeling that the husband and father had paid heed to the command of the Saviour, "Be ye also ready."

On the contrary, each and all of them felt that death under such circumstances was too awful to contemplate. Well might poor Aunt Pierson sob out, as the tears streamed down her cheeks, "If I could but have heard him say that he felt ready to die, that he was happy."

But in this case, to those who remained, death had not lost his sting. And only he can be counted happy who rests upon the cleansing power of Christ's atoning blood, who, spiritually taught and endowed with

faith, is enabled to lay hold on the hope set before him—who can realize the meaning of those precious words, which tell that “There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus.”

In the bitterest cup of merely human trouble there is always some drop of comfort, and, in the midst of her deep sorrow and dark prospects, Aunt Pierson had one pleasant reflection. She had uttered no word of reproach against her husband. No anger, no bitterness on her part had increased his remorse for the past. And how thankful she was that she had been enabled to put a bridle upon her lips. If she could have foreseen the blow that was going to fall she could not have acted with more tenderness and forbearance towards the partner of five-and-twenty years than she had done. She was thus saved from the pang which is so often the lot of those left mourning for one suddenly snatched away—the pang that the memory of unkind word or deed, unrepented of and unforgiven, is sure to cause. Whatever the faults of the dead may have been, they seem to become as nothing in comparison, while our own are remembered with double self-reproach when the power to make amends is gone for ever.

The news of farmer Pierson's sudden death spread rapidly through the town of Ashleybridge, and at the same time, nobody seemed to know how, the people became possessed of minute information respecting the embarrassed state of his worldly affairs. There had been vague rumours afloat before, as we know, and that, through young Murray, they had reached the ears of the Robertsons, at Birkdale. Hitherto, however, these reports had been only whispered amongst a few persons in confidence; now they were repeated by little groups of farmers in the corn-market, and by knots of people gathered at the street corners. Mr. Pierson and his family were well known in and about Ashleybridge, and now the double tidings of his death, and threatened poverty to those left behind,

excited a melancholy interest. Some indeed spoke most kindly and pityingly both of the dead and the living, for the Piersons were not people to provoke enmity in their neighbours.

But there were others who could spare a good word for neither, and said that Farmer Pierson's free living had ruined his health, while the extravagance of the females of his family had drained his pocket.

"Do *you* know what is the extent of the liabilities?" asked a lady customer of the principal draper in Ashleybridge, when these matters were discussed in her hearing.

"Indeed, ma'am, I do not. Everybody is talking of the heavy debts, and that poor Mrs. Pierson and the young ladies will be sadly reduced; but I am ignorant on what foundation."

"I trust you will be no loser," remarked the lady, in a tone which sounded as though she expected to hear of a heavy bill for finery of various kinds, and was prepared to pity the tradesman.

"Mrs. Pierson does not owe me a penny," replied the draper, very warmly. "She has long been one of my best customers; but she always paid ready money for every article, both for herself and the young ladies. From my own experience of her, I do not think she was likely to run into debt, and I cannot help believing that, should these reports prove true, it will be found that Mrs. Pierson has had no hand in bringing about such a state of things."

"Perhaps so," replied the lady; "but if Mr. Pierson's affairs were in an embarrassed state, it was surely the duty of his wife to diminish her expenses in order to assist her husband, and we all know that she and the young people dressed more expensively than anybody in this neighbourhood."

"That is true, but I think it quite possible Mrs. Pierson was kept in ignorance of these embarrassments, if such existed. She is a person of easy temper, who would trust her husband, and be contented with

just so much information as he chose to give her. And pardon me if I seem to speak warmly, but you know we tradespeople have many opportunities of observing little traits of character in our regular customers, and, after several years' observation, I can only say of Mrs. Pierson that I believe her to be a thoroughly honest woman."

The draper paused somewhat abruptly, and the lady, following the direction of his eyes, recognised in a person who had just entered the shop a messenger from Mrs. Pierson; no doubt come to make arrangements about the funeral. She would have liked to hear what was said, but the draper, who seemed determined to rebuke the uncharitable spirit shown by his customer, and to prevent the indulgence of her curiosity, took the messenger up-stairs and consequently out of hearing.

To the surprise of the young man who had charge of the mourning goods, Mr. Ellwand declared his intention of waiting upon Mrs. Pierson himself, and ordered parcels of the necessary articles of the very best quality to be made up, and sent to the farm.

"This doesn't look as though the master had any doubts about being paid," remarked the assistant, as he saw the goods packed up. He would have wondered more had he heard the order, which was for articles of a very plain and inexpensive kind.

The dressmaker met Mr. Ellwand at the farm, but the respectful request of the draper that he might see Mrs. Pierson alone, brought him into her presence. In a few very kind words the good-hearted tradesman expressed his sympathy, and then said, "I know you will excuse this intrusion, but I was anxious to serve you myself, as you used to express yourself better satisfied with my choice of goods than those the young men brought. And, Mrs. Pierson, I have ventured to bring something rather different from what your messenger instructed me to do."

"These things are too expensive, Mr. Ellwand,"

said Mrs. Pierson, interrupting him, "I can tell that without asking the price. I must speak the truth," she added, controlling her tears by a strong effort. "Things are likely to be changed with us, and we must fit our wants to our little means. I will not order what I am not sure of being able to pay for. You may have heard—"

"I have heard some reports which I hoped were not true," replied the draper, perceiving that Mrs. Pierson was unable to proceed; "and I ventured to say that if they were, I believed that you were in no way to blame."

"Thank you, Mr. Ellwand. It is a comfort to be so kindly judged. I am very glad you have come yourself, for there is a little matter I can mention. Indeed I want to ask a favour of you."

"You have only to mention it, and if it be in my power I shall be very glad to do it."

"It is just this, Mr. Ellwand. I bought a dress, a coloured satin, some weeks since, and a piece of linen sheeting. They have not been touched yet, and are not likely to be needed. If you would let me return them, the price would buy us plain mourning."

"Most willingly, but only return the linen if you really do not require it, Mrs. Pierson. The coloured dress I know you would find useless, but the other——"

"I shall not want, I feel assured, thank you all the same. And now I will look at the things, if you please, for the funeral must be soon."

There were no black stuffs of an inferior quality, even through eyes dimmed with tears Aunt Pierson could see that, and yet the prices were very moderate.

She looked inquiringly in the draper's face, then said, "Mr. Ellwand, I think you must be favouring me a good deal."

"You have favoured me, Mrs. Pierson, for several years past, and you must please allow me to do the very best I can for you this time. I am simply offer-

ing you these articles at cost price, so that I shall lose nothing, and I hope you will not object to my thus showing my gratitude without hurting myself in any way. As to the payment, I will gladly return what you gave for the articles to be sent back, and these can be booked if you wish it."

But Mrs. Pierson did not wish it. She accepted with gratitude the draper's kind offer of good articles at cost price, but would not run into debt to the amount of a single shilling. When Mr. Ellwand had gone she told Fanny and Margaret of his kindness, saying, "They said that the master had come himself about the mourning, and I could hardly believe it, for it's a thing I never knew of him doing to anybody else. Then I thought, Perhaps he has heard something, and wants to know whether I shall be able to pay him before he lets me have the things; and I couldn't tell you what my feelings were when he spoke so kindly and considerately. Most people are ready to take advantage when a time of trouble comes, but he is not one of that sort. It gave me comfort to think there was somebody who remembered bygones, and had a kind heart towards us."

Fanny and Margaret were both sensibly moved by this little act of kindness, yet they were doomed to suffer in the good opinion of some of their neighbours by this simple occurrence. It was remarked, that it mattered little whether these people were reduced to poverty or not, they *would* not stint in the matter of dress; for on the day of the funeral anybody could see that they had on the very best of mourning. And, if there was not so much crape cut into trimmings, no doubt it was because they thought it a shame to cover such beautiful fine stuff as the dresses were made of. It was not the most showy mourning that was most expensive.

Mr. Ellwand was not the person to trumpet forth his dealings with the farmer's widow, and he had requested her not to mention the circumstances of



their little bargain, so the gossips had it their own way, and again censured the extravagance of the three sorrow-stricken women as they stood round the grave of the husband, father, and uncle.

But surely we who have seen both sides may take to ourselves a lesson far better taught in the Saviour's own words, "Judge not, that ye be not judged."

Fanny Pierson wrote to her aunt Martin before the funeral, and asked her, her uncle, and cousins, to attend it, but none of them came, neither did George Robertson or his son, to whom a similar invitation had been forwarded. The two latter did not receive the letter in time, for they were from home, and the Martins had not forgiven the slight offered to their son by Fanny's refusal.

Mrs. Pierson was not sorry that these remained away, for she felt that her sister's condolences would have in them too much of the "I told you how it would be" sort of spirit, to furnish either sympathy or comfort.

But, in this season of trouble, she would have liked George Robertson beside her. She was conscious of wrong done to her brother-in-law. She could see now with a clearer vision, than when in prosperous times she thought only of having her own way, at whatever cost to others. But she thought, if only George were near, and could know all, he would forgive and help her. She durst not be sure that the Martins, having been offended, would not even triumph over her in her changed position, but George never would do that. Somewhat stern he might be at times, but he was honest, true, and kind. She believed he would forget and forgive, and a feeling of great disappointment came over her when, instead of George, a letter arrived from his wife saying that her husband was from home.

Ellen's letter was not very warmly expressed, or, at any rate, it did not seem so to Aunt Pierson. The truth was that, while Ellen was very anxious to write

kindly, and her heart was full of sympathy, she had been so often checked in her advances towards friendliness by the sisters of her husband's first wife, that she was fearful of making more. Then Margaret's departure from home, her setting her father's wishes at defiance, and being encouraged so to do by both the Martins and Piersons, and the stern way in which Robertson had of late refused to speak of his daughter, or even listen to the letters which Fred continued to receive, were circumstances sufficient to make poor Ellen's hasty letter a very constrained one, even though she was longing to act the part of peacemaker.

Aunt Pierson sighed over the brief note as she replaced it in the envelope. "I am sorry," she said. "I do wish your father were here, Margaret. I would ask him to 'let bygones be bygones,' and to stand my friend, for he has learning enough to understand all these terrible business matters, and good sense to advise as to what had best be done."

"He'll never come, aunt," sobbed Margaret. "Father is quite set against me, I know, for Fred told me in one of his letters that he never mentions me now, and won't let him speak of me either. I've not done rightly towards him, I feel that, but——"

"No more have I, Maggie," said Aunt Pierson. "I can see that in taking you from your father in the way we did, we didn't do as we'd have been done by. We ought to have submitted to George's wish, and trusted to him not to part you from us altogether. He would have done what was right and fair to us after we had brought you up like our own daughter; but we would have all, and wouldn't trust him. If you were to write, Maggie——"

Margaret burst into a passion of tears. "I can never write, aunt, for I know I should just get my letter back as it went. I shall never forget how father parted with me. If he had given me a kind word, I believe I should have thrown my arms round his neck and told him I would not leave him; for though I

loved you and Fanny, and poor uncle, very dearly, I could not help feeling that I owed much to my father, that he ought to be first. But he was so cold. He just bade me take my choice, and his manner seemed fairly to freeze up every bit of love and kindness that was in me. I could not ask him to come now, or meet him if he were here, for how could I bear him to look at me again in the way he did when we left Birkdale?"

If Margaret could but have understood her father, and known how, in spite of apparent coldness, his heart was full of affection and yearning towards his child, that when his words were calm even to sternness, one sign of returning obedience on her part would have changed all this! But another feeling was now at work in the girl's heart—that of pride. If she were to submit now they would say it was because, her relatives being reduced to poverty, she was compelled by necessity to return to her father. She remembered Fred's words to herself, "I believe the time will come when you will know father and mother as your best earthly friends, and will be glad of the shelter of the roof you now despise," and could recall to mind how proudly her thoughts replied, though he gave her no chance of answering aloud, "I would rather work for my bread in the humblest position than be indebted to that roof for a shelter after what has passed to-day."

These and many more proud and rebellious thoughts filled Margaret's mind. She felt that she had not done her duty to her father, but was ashamed to acknowledge her fault, and resolved rather to persist in the wrong than to own it, and stoop to ask forgiveness. And yet she was conscious that in this season of trouble her father's plain common sense would have been invaluable to her aunt Pierson, who bitterly bewailed her lot in thus standing alone with no husband, brother, or son, to be a support or counsellor. Margaret suggested that they should apply to young

Woodward, who had been a frequent and friendly visitor at the farm.

"You forget, Maggie, that young Mr. Woodward only acts under his uncle, and that the old gentleman is solicitor for Mr. Tomline, who holds the mortgage."

"I suppose there is no chance of us stopping in the farm, mother?" said Fanny.

"Not the least, child. Mr. Tomline has let me know *that* very plainly already, though it is only a fortnight since your father died. He wants it for a nephew of his own. We *shall* have to leave, and though we couldn't be turned out just yet, it may be better for us to quit soon than later. We may gain by accommodating him. But, oh dear me! my very heart sinks within me when I try to look into things. I feel bewildered. I think if I could but save a little out of the wreck, as one may say, I mean rightly and honestly, you know, for I wish everybody to be paid to the last farthing, I should like to go back to Birkdale. It was my home as a girl, and I spent my happiest married days there. When I left it I had a good many friends that wished me well, and I believe some of them would be as kind and neighbourly as ever, though my own sister, Hannah, mightn't be among that number."

Margaret could not understand her aunt's longing after her old home. The girl herself would have wished to keep far away from all who had known her in better days, or such as would be called by that name. Mrs. Pierson, however, was utterly subdued by her recent trial, and had none of the pride which would have made her reject sympathy and kindness from any quarter, while both would have seemed more precious if from old friends and neighbours.

After pondering in her mind what was best to be done, the widow resolved on consulting Mr. Ellwand, whose goodwill towards herself had been already shown, and in whom she felt she could place entire confidence.

## CHAPTER XVII.

### A FRIEND IN NEED—A NEW HOME IN THE OLD NEIGHBOURHOOD.

AUNT PIERSON was not disappointed in her choice of a counsellor. Though Mr. Ellwand knew nothing of farming he was a man of business, and when Mrs. Pierson explained to him the position in which she found herself, and detailed all the circumstances in connexion with the affairs of her late husband, so far as they had come to her knowledge, just *before* and since his death, the kindhearted tradesman interested himself warmly in her behalf. By his advice she placed the whole management of her affairs in the hands of *his* lawyer, for he said, "I am not sufficiently acquainted with all the ins and outs of this law business, to serve you as a professional man can. But I *will* gladly devote a portion of my time to examining into things with him, and, as I lately had to do with a case of the kind, on behalf of a deceased relative's children, what little experience I have gained shall be used in your service."

Mr. Ellwand was better than his promise. Deeply touched by Mrs. Pierson's painful position—all the more so from its having come upon her unexpectedly, and accompanied by the loss of her husband—he devoted much time and pains to the investigation of her affairs. Things turned out somewhat better than could have been expected; and, in place of utter poverty, the widow found that when stock, crop, farm, and the most costly furniture were disposed of, there would

remain enough, after all debts were paid, to secure a little income for herself and daughter.

The worthy draper was delighted at the result.

"You will have," said he, "all your household linen and clothes, and abundance of substantial articles for the comfortable furnishing of a smaller home. Then the few hundreds that are over must be carefully invested, and that will bring in sufficient for your actual wants. I believe poor Mr. Pierson had not looked into his accounts very closely for some time before his death. He knew they had gone a long way wrong, and thinking they were worse than they were, had not courage to face the difficulty. Thank God, his wife and child will not be left quite destitute."

Tears streamed down the widow's cheeks as she poured forth her acknowledgments for Mr. Ellwand's kindness, and unfolded her plans for the future.

"Your niece tells me that you think of returning with Miss Fanny to your native place, where you have many friends," he replied, "and from what she says, I think you may live comfortably on your small income in such a little quiet country village."

"O yes. Three females, Mr. Ellwand, will not cost much to keep, and as to clothes and linen, and such like, I was always one that liked a real good stock. I have what will more than last my lifetime, except for the matter of upper things, such as gowns, if I should be spared to want them, for I shall never wear colours again."

Mr. Ellwand looked wonderingly at Margaret as her aunt was speaking. The girl blushed, and said, "I had not told my aunt and cousin about the arrangement you have so kindly assisted me in making. I always said, you know, aunt, that I should not go to Birkdale, neither could I bear to let your little income be taxed to support me. So, without telling you, I asked Mr. Ellwand to use his interest towards getting me a situation. He has done so, and I am going to it in about ten days."

"O Maggie," cried Aunt Pierson, "I never thought you would have turned your back on us now—you, that have been the same as my own. Whatever there was, little or much, you would have been welcome to your share."

"I know, dear aunt, I know," replied Margaret; "but now ask Mr. Ellwand whether he thinks it would be right to live in idleness, and lessen your comforts by taking a part of what is not too much for you and Fanny."

Mr. Ellwand, who knew nothing of Margaret's other objections to returning to Birkdale, nothing of her father or his family, and who looked at the matter simply as it had been put before him with regard to her aunt and cousin, warmly applauded the young girl's resolution.

"Miss Robertson is right," he said, "so far as I can judge, and you must not think that in separating from you she shows want of affection, but the contrary. It is her desire rather to add to your comforts than to lessen them. One of the young people you ought to have with you, and your own daughter must be first. No doubt the trial to your niece will be great, for she feels already the pain of parting, but it will be for the good of all. I assure you, Mrs. Pierson, my girls are not to stay at home in idleness. I think it bad for them; and though I am doing my best to make a little provision for their future, I make them work in the meanwhile."

Mr. Ellwand's words carried weight. Aunt Pierson could not contradict them, and she would not tell him that, under her brother-in-law's roof at Birkdale, Margaret might find the occupation she needed, do her duty to her father, and avoid a separation from herself and Fanny—false pride prevented her.

"And what situation are you going to, Margaret?" inquired her aunt.

Margaret looked at Mr. Ellwand as if asking him

to explain. "The situation," he replied, "is not altogether what I should like to obtain for your niece, but it was the first that offered itself, and Miss Margaret was so resolved on getting to work at once that she undertook its duties. One of my lady customers who resides about four miles from this, was inquiring about a governess for her children, and it is to her Miss Margaret is going."

At this point of the conversation Mr. Ellwand looked at his watch, and found he must leave them, so on Margaret herself devolved the task of giving further particulars. She had to undergo a catechizing from her aunt and Fanny as soon as his back was turned.

"I may as well tell you all about it," she replied with a glowing face. "It will be a change for me, but I've made up my mind to it. The lady's name is Harris. She lives at Brooklands, that village on the Effington line of railway; we passed it last summer; and she has four children, the eldest is six, the youngest a year old."

"But you can only have about a couple of them to teach, if they are so young, Maggie, and they will not require a very learned governess."

"I am only called a nursery governess, and I shall have to take charge of all the children, at least in a great measure, and their clothes too. It is not," she added in her proud tone, "the sort of thing that I once expected, but I would do anything rather than go back to Birkdale. Beside, aunt, don't you remember you used to tell me that if I went to my father's, I should have a nursemaid's work without her wages? With Mrs. Harris I shall have fair wages, at any rate."

Yes, Aunt Pierson did remember. She had used those very words, echoed from her sister Martin's, to induce Margaret to take that first step—indirect disobedience to her father. She had done wrong, and now she had her reward in hearing her own former



arguments used against herself. She and Fanny both tried to persuade Margaret to give up this engagement. "A nursemaid's place, Maggie," said both, "not a bit better; and after your bringing-up!"

But it was in vain. Margaret went to Brooklands on the same day that Mrs. Pierson and her daughter bade farewell to the farm at Ashleybridge, and journeyed to take possession of a neat little house at Birkdale.

This little spot, though containing only four rooms, was superior to the cottages in the neighbourhood, having been built by the Birkdale squire for the accommodation of a valued attendant of his mother's, who wished to spend her last days near the place where her old mistress was buried. There were two excellent bedrooms, with kitchen and parlour below them. The front door, half hidden by a rose and woodbine covered porch, was between these two last. Beside these was a smaller kitchen or scullery opening both into the front kitchen and the back garden, and there was sufficient ground to allow of a cow being kept should the tenant choose to keep one.

The whole place was compact and pretty, and though small, large enough for the wants of Mrs. Pierson and her daughter. Indeed, both rejoiced that after the anxiety they had lately endured, and the darkness which seemed for a time to hover around them, there was not only a roof to shelter, but a really bright little home to receive them, and a sufficient provision for their real wants.

Mrs. Martin and her family held themselves aloof from the mother and daughter, and Aunt Pierson, to whom some of the neighbours were not slow to repeat the sayings of her sister, felt it rather a relief that they did so. "I know," said Mrs. Pierson, "that your aunt would have her say, Fanny, for she never could keep anything in, however unpleasant it might be for one to hear. I used to take a good deal, for

peace and quietness' sake, for I knew it was her way, and I never could abide to fall out with my own sister. But I'm afraid if she were to come now, and begin saying that she was sorry for us, but she always felt how it would be, and maybe begin blaming him that's gone, I might lose my temper. I could stand a good deal, Fanny, and I'm not without feeling a regard for Hannah, seeing that she's my sister, and it's right to hold with one's relations if one can, but if she did say a word about your dead father, at least an unkind one, I could never stand it, so perhaps it's best as it is. I did feel it, though, last Sunday, when we were at church, and I saw the Robertsons had put on black, at least all but the young children, and your aunt Martin was in colours as fine as you please."

"Maybe the Robertsons are in black for some relation of their own."

"Nay, they're not. I asked Mrs. Jones, you'll remember her, Fanny, and she said it was for your father. Old James Richards is living yet, but he's getting very infirm. I always had a sort of leaning towards Ellen when she was a girl, and after George married her I should have kept friendly, for he might have done a deal worse, but your aunt Martin went on so, and I held with her just because she was my sister, not that I always thought she was right. And now to see how she has turned against me."

It was a great grievance with Mrs. Pierson to feel that her only sister was thus cold and indifferent towards her, for she was sensible that whatever might have been her shortcomings with regard to others, Mrs. Martin could accuse her of none towards herself. "And," thought she, "I've neither said nor done anything to offend her, for she couldn't expect my poor husband and me to take against Fanny just because she did not fancy her cousin Henry Martin. I can't say that I'm fond of relations marrying, but if the girl had liked him there's no law

against it in such a case, and we shouldn't have hindered them."

Fanny was perhaps more indignant against her aunt Martin than was Mrs. Pierson, whose desire for peace would have induced her to bend in order to preserve it with her sister. The girl could not forget how, during her visits to Birkdale, she had been flattered and petted by her aunt, who then looked upon her as the heiress to a very respectable fortune which she desired her son to share at some future day.

Some of Mrs. Martin's sayings had also been reported to her, which served to widen the breach, and made Fanny by no means anxious to be intimate again even with her nearest relations.

Truly Mrs. Martin's tongue had been allowed much license when she heard of her sister's altered prospects, and thought them even worse than they afterwards proved to be. In the first place, it was unpleasant to think how often she had herself boasted of that home at Ashleybridge, where her sister reigned as mistress, and wore every day clothes quite as rich, if not more so, than those of their landlord's wife. It had been pleasant to talk of the company who visited there, of the wide fields, Uncle Pierson's own, and to hint at the fortune which would some day fall to *her niece*. Maggie Robertson would, no doubt, drop in for something, and right too, to support the superior "bringing-up," but Fanny Pierson would be an heiress; and Aunt Martin seemed to think that to talk of the grand doings of her relatives gave her additional dignity at Birkdale. Besides, she had quite decided that, through her son Henry, the only one left unmarried, Fanny's fortune might be brought into her own family.

It is easy to fancy how Aunt Martin's feelings would change with the reverse of fortune and the downfall of her hopes. If she had liked to shine through the close connexion with people who were presumed to be wealthy, she was the first to separate

herself from them in what she deemed a season of disgrace.

"It was what anybody might have foretold," she said. "For her part, she had long seen what such doings must lead to. Pride and extravagance could bring but one kind of ending; and if people lived at such a rate they must expect to come down. She pitied poor Pierson, and thought his death a happy release. It would do Fanny good to have to work for her living, and teach her not to look down upon those who were better than herself."

These hard sayings, of course, losing nothing in the telling, had all reached Fanny Pierson's ears. She had good sense enough to keep them from her mother; but others had not; and they reached her through another channel, and pained Mrs. Pierson not a little.

"I wish Hannah had not spoken in such a way," said the poor woman, with tears rolling down her cheeks. "There are plenty to speak hardly of us when trouble comes, without one's own relations doing it; and, after all, I didn't deserve it from anybody, much less from her. Whatever Hannah may think, nobody has lost a farthing by us. There was enough to pay all, and a little to spare; and if there hadn't, both Fanny and me would ha' worked our fingers to the bones before we'd have kept back a halfpenny, for all she thinks so ill of us. And," continued Aunt Pierson, provoked into just a little boastfulness, "we're not beggars either. We've enough to keep us in a quiet, comfortable way, and, when I die, Fanny will have more than Martin can give to each of his sons, or I'm mistaken."

"I believe your sister wishes she hadn't let her tongue run so fast," was the reply. "She said all this, and a great deal more than I could repeat, at a time when she thought you and your daughter would be penniless. If the truth were known, she'd give something to bring her words back. But it's as well

that she's shown herself in her true colours, though she is your sister. I often think of that verse in Proverbs: 'Neither go into thy brother's house in the day of thy calamity: for better is a neighbour that is near than a brother far off.' There's Scripture for it, you see, and it just proves what we so often find in this world, that relations are least to be trusted to in the time of trouble. I thought it was right you should know what I've mentioned, that you might be on your guard."

"Thank you for telling me," said Mrs. Pierson, sadly enough, and by no means looking so much obliged by the information.

The visitor now wished for a little in turn.

"Have you heard from your niece very lately, Mrs. Pierson?"

"What! Maggie Robertson? No; not for nearly a month. I daresay she is very much engaged, for governesses have to work hard."

"A governess is she?" repeated the visitor, in a tone of surprise. "I had understood that she was in a different situation; but, of course, you must know better than any one, for I believe they seldom hear from her at home. I hope she is comfortable."

Aunt Pierson hardly knew what to say. She was unwilling to answer the question directly, for poor Maggie's last letter had been written in rather a desponding tone, and they had gathered from it that she found her duties very hard and wearying. Indeed, she could scarcely spare time to write the few short lines to Fanny, their only letter in more than a month. But she had warned them to say nothing which might give Birkdale people, and, least of all, her father and brother, any idea how irksome she found her position. So Aunt Pierson, hardly knowing what to say, replied, "I hope she is comfortable, though, of course, she must find any place different from the home she had at Ashleybridge. I daresay we shall soon hear again, for Fanny has written twice."

This was more than Fanny liked to have told, and right glad was she when the visitor rose to go.

"You hear how your aunt Martin has gone on," said Mrs. Pierson, as soon as she was alone with her daughter.

"I heard it some months since, when we first came to Birkdale, mother."

"And you never told me, Fanny! You seem to be getting quite close. You shouldn't be, for I have only you in the world now your father is gone."

The girl started from her seat, and, putting her arms round her mother's neck, she kissed her again and again, while she wiped away the tears from her cheeks.

"Mother," she said, "I did not tell you, because I thought it a great deal better you should not know. If it had been anything to give you pleasure, I should have been in haste to tell it; but why should I bring news that would only trouble you? I would have given anything to stop Mrs. French while she was repeating all this gossip, for I felt that every word would be like a stab to you when you thought of it as coming from Aunt Hannah's lips. And now, as I see these tears, I feel that I did right not to tell, and I am very sorry you have heard one word of it."

"Mrs. French thought it only *right* I should know," sighed her mother.

"Where can be the good of repeating what is likely to make people, and sisters too, feel more bitterly towards one another? I remember once hearing a gentleman check an acquaintance who was beginning to repeat some unkind speech, which another, whom he believed to be his friend, had made when he was not present. He said, 'I would much rather you did not tell me. At present, I can meet that person with pleasure. I have received much kindness from him at various times, and have a feeling of respect and friendship for him. But if you were to repeat one unkind or thoughtless speech

of his about me, this pleasure would be destroyed. The unkind words would come into my mind, and make me forget, for the time at least, all of an opposite nature that he had said or done. Instead of pleasure, I should feel restraint, and coldness instead of friendship. He may have spoken unadvisedly with his lips, while there was no malice in his heart. I have often done so myself, and would have given anything to recall the idle word. It may have been my friend's case. At any rate, I would rather not know what has been said, and then we shall meet as of old.' "

" There's a good deal of sense in that, Fanny; but Mrs. French is not by herself in repeating what your aunt Martin said, or you wouldn't have heard."

" More's the pity, dear mother; but I am afraid that she, at least, is not likely to experience the blessing pronounced by our Lord upon the peace-makers. It is the whisperer that 'separateth chief friends;' and nobody can tell the harm one woman like Mrs. French can do in this way, by going about, from house to house, and repeating all the foolish and angry words that people say of one another. Mother, dear, since all those troubles came upon us, I have felt differently from what I used to do. When poor father lay dead in the house, and we were so desolate, I began to see that there are times when wealth and fine clothes, nay, all that the world has, cannot comfort us. And then, if having them is of no use in a season of sorrow, how much worse are we off if the riches in which we have been used to trust 'take to themselves wings, and fly away?' O mother, it is at such times that we are led to look for something better, something that ends not with this world, but will be our comfort in adversity, our support in weakness—that will be our staff in old age, and will abide with us for ever."

Mrs. Pierson was surprised at her daughter's earnestness; for Fanny did not speak as though this were a

light matter with her. The mother had had her thoughts and yearnings after the "something" of which Fanny spoke: but after the great trouble had passed, and their worldly affairs were comparatively settled, she had fallen into her old easy way. The girl, however, did not forget, and ever with the memory of her father's death came the haunting question, "Was he prepared for such a summons?" From this she was led to apply it to herself, and ask her heart, "Am I even trying to obey the command to watch and to be ready?"

Self-condemned, she was led to "seek those things which are above," and realise the promise made by our Lord Himself, when He said, "Seek, and ye shall find."

As yet Fanny's Christian experience was but small. Still, like all who by Divine grace are led to see their own need of a Saviour, she was earnestly desiring to know more of Him, and that those nearest and dearest to her should share in the knowledge. This had led her to speak with such earnestness to her mother, and to lay bare her own heart, in the hope of awakening similar feelings in her widowed parent, if, indeed, they did not already exist. And the girl found comfort for herself in the very telling of her thoughts, while the mother's interest was awakened by the evident sincerity of her child. Henceforth, Fanny did not seek alone.



## CHAPTER XVIII.

### SUSPENSE ABOUT THE ABSENT, AND SICKNESS AT HOME.

ANOTHER month passed, and still no news came from Margaret Robertson. Fanny had written three times, but no answer was received. At length she ventured to address a few lines to Mrs. Harris, Margaret's employer, at Brooklands, in order to ascertain from that lady whether she were still there or not.

Margaret's own family were in equal ignorance of her movements, and all were at a loss to understand her silence.

Mrs. Pierson and Fanny had often met George Robertson, his wife, and children, and always exchanged kindly greetings; but, somehow, no member of either family had as yet crossed the threshold of the other.

Ellen, kind-hearted Ellen, often wished they could all be brought together. She thought she saw something about the Piersons, mother and daughter, that was indicative of a similar wish, and she had always believed that Mrs. Martin caused the first estrangement. But she durst not—indeed, she would not—act in opposition to her husband, and George felt very strongly on the subject.

"I bear no malice," he said; "and, in spite of all that has passed, I wish Mrs. Pierson and her daughter well. But there's a point beyond which I will not go. You remember, Ellen, how you went to both my sisters-in-law, and gave them the kindest invitations to our quiet wedding, years ago. They would

not come; but Mrs. Martin said hard things instead, both before your face and behind your back. I believe Jane was simply misled then. She had been so used to her sister's rule, that she seemed as though she must do whatever Hannah said. Well; they were kind to my children, as I thought. They took Maggie, with my consent, though against my better judgment; only I wished the girl to have what my little means would not afford. I was grateful, Ellen, you know, until I found that my child had learned to despise our home, to treat you with coldness, and sometimes even impertinence, and, last of all, to set her father at nought. Amongst them she was encouraged to disobey. I cannot tell who did most harm, though I believe it was Aunt Martin there too, but I know what has come of it."

"They have had trials themselves, George."

"I know; and I feel for them, Ellen. But I do not wish to seek them for all that. If they ever seek us, I will show them I can forgive; but any advance must come from the Piersons."

"Why, George, when you heard that they were likely to be left penniless, you were for writing to offer them a home, and said that those who had sheltered and cared for Maggie through so many years, though they might have wronged you in some things, should never want, as long as you had a sixpence to share with them."

George Robertson's forehead flushed scarlet, as if he had been accused of something wrong. He passed his hand across it, pushing aside the hair—getting grey now—which shaded it, and said, with a laugh—

"I did say it, Ellen; and I should have carried it out; but I heard, directly after, that Aunt Pierson and Fanny were coming to live here in a house of their own. I thought—but it is of no use going over these things. Better never name them."

Ellen knew well what the thought was—that

Maggie would come home to them softened by the trouble that had fallen upon the home at Ashley-bridge, and ready to take her place in his more humble but not less comfortable one. And again had come bitter disappointment, and the family chain was incomplete. He rarely mentioned Margaret now, but he was aware that his son had written, again and again, without receiving any answer; and, despite his endeavours to stifle these natural feelings, the father's heart was heavy within him; and the fears of all were excited lest some evil had befallen Maggie.

Three days passed after this conversation, and still they were in the same suspense. Fred Robertson and his father returned from the workshop together in the evening, and, as the young man entered, his stepmother was struck by his changed appearance. She had noticed for a day or two past that his appetite had not been good, and, with her usual thoughtful kindness, prepared various little dainties, in the hope of tempting him to eat. Fred thoroughly understood and valued her motherly kindness, and unwilling to make her anxious on his account, strove to partake of them. But on this evening he felt it utterly useless to contend against the signs of approaching illness, and, without going as usual to wash himself and change his clothes, before sitting down to tea, he dropped into the nearest chair, and leaned his aching head upon his hand.

"What is the matter, Fred? I am sure you are not well," said his mother, in an anxious tone.

"He is over-tired," interposed her husband. "You know we are rather extra busy just now, and he has done too much when he was less fit for work than common. I would have had him come home hours ago; but he kept at it in spite of all I could say. He is never disobedient except from over-anxiety to help his father. But we shall lay the strong hand on him to-morrow, and you must nurse him, mother."

The young man looked up as his father spoke, and smiled at his words; then answered—

"I hope a night's rest will do me good; but, just now, I feel as if it would be a trouble to lift my hand to my head. I have exhausted all my powers at the shop."

Ellen and her husband exchanged glances of alarm, for no one could observe the expression of Frederic's countenance without being painfully struck by it. His eyes were unnaturally bright, but looked strangely sunken; and though he complained of cold, and shivered, yet Ellen felt that his hands were hot and dry.

Fred observed the anxious look on her face, and tried to shake off the languor that was stealing over him. "I'll have a cup of tea, mother," he said, "and then I shall feel better, I have no doubt. Afterwards I will wash, and go to bed directly, that a long night's rest may put me to rights."

Ellen hastened to pour out the tea, and tried to tempt Fred's appetite with the offer of all her little dainties: but he could not touch a morsel, though he drank eagerly. When he rose from the table, both Robertson and his wife noticed that the young man's legs seemed to tremble beneath his weight, and his step was unsteady and utterly unlike his usual firm tread. Ellen followed her stepson into the little kitchen, where he and her husband generally used to wash when they came in from their work.

"My dear boy," said she, "you are ill, and must have some advice at once."

"I believe I am, mother," he replied, dropping wearily into a seat. "A few hours make a wonderful difference, and show us what poor, feeble creatures we are. I was boasting but yesterday of the work I could get through, and now I can hardly lift my hand. I tried hard to keep up to-day, for father is pressed with work, and we are a man short, now poor Will Somers is laid up with rheumatism."

"You have done too much, Fred, when you were not well enough for your regular work. I hope this may be nothing serious; but it will be better to have Mr. Gray from Wolfstown. There is nothing like taking these things in time."

"I will see how I am in the morning, mother. I may be cured by a night's rest."

Fred was going to kiss the children and his mother before he went up-stairs, as had been his custom, but he recollected himself, and turned away.

"I don't know what is hanging about me," he said, "so I will not run any risk of giving my complaint to these youngsters. I shall blow you a double allowance instead."

He kissed his hand and pretended to blow the kisses towards the children and his stepmother, then went up-stairs. Ellen followed as soon as she thought he would be in bed, and with gentle hands arranged the clothes and pillows, placed one of those cooling herb drinks, which old-fashioned country folk make and believe in, within his reach, then bent over him in such a position as to avoid inhaling his breath, and kissed his forehead.

He took hold of her hand in his hot one, and pressed it lovingly. "Mother, you are kind," he said. "I was just wishing poor Maggie could know you as I do. Then instead of being lonely and desolate, she would, like me, be able to think of two mothers,—one gone before to the 'Better Land,' another given to be a true comfort in a world of many trials. I suppose no letter has come for me to-day. I did not ask in father's presence, because I know that every disappointment makes his heart ache, though he says little."

"There is no letter, Fred. If there had been I should not have let you ask for it. It is so strange, for it seems she has written to nobody in Birkdale lately, not even her cousin, Fanny Pierson."

"I wish our fears could be set at rest. I should

like to know how she is placed, and what she is doing, so that, if I should be *very* ill, mother, you might send for her. Father would yield in such a case, and Maggie is my twin sister. By nature we are nearer than most, but circumstances have placed us so wide apart."

At this moment one of the children called, "Mother, you're wanted," and Ellen was obliged to go down to speak to the new comer, who had called to ask the loan of a little domestic article. She was soon served and went away.

"How does Fred seem, now?" asked her husband, as soon as the woman's back was turned.

"Very ill, I fear, George. I should like Mr. Gray to be sent for. I believe Fred feels more than he lets us know of."

"I would walk to Wolftown and fetch him, Ellen. The boy must not be neglected. Does the attack seem like a fever?"

"I am afraid so, but I have not heard of a single case of the sort either here or in the neighbourhood. Perhaps I could send a message to the doctor without your going. Mrs. Jones's third daughter, Patty, who is in service at Wolftown, has been home for the day, and if she has not gone back could take a message. You are tired enough, George. I'll just slip on my bonnet and run into father's. Mary will know, for her sister was to call there the last place."

Ellen lost not an instant, and was rewarded by finding that she was just in time to send the message by Patty Jones, and thus save her husband a journey of some miles. She was hurrying back, when she met a young woman in deep mourning, and recognised Fanny Pierson. She would have passed with only a word, but Fanny stopped her.

"Mrs. Robertson, do stay a moment. I'm so glad I have happened to meet you. I want to tell you about cousin Maggie, if you have heard nothing."

Ellen stopped directly. "We have not had a line,"

she replied, "and, Miss Pierson, if you can tell me any good news, I shall be thankful. Poor Fred has written often without getting an answer, and now he has come home ill. I have just been sending for the doctor, but I believe that if I could take him tidings of his sister that would be like medicine for him."

"Cousin Fred ill! I am sorry to hear it. I have had no letter from Margaret herself, and I hardly know what sort of news to call this," added Fanny, taking out a letter as she spoke. "It is from Mrs. Harris, of Brooklands, to whom I wrote when I heard nothing from Margaret. Take it with you, *aunt*. I'll come to see how cousin Fred is if you'll let me."

Ellen's surprise at the young girl's words was very great. She stammered out that she should be glad to see Fanny, but Fred's illness might be serious, and it would be better to hear what the doctor said before she ventured to the house.

"Well, I shall come to the door in the morning and ask if I may be let in. O Mrs. Robertson," she added, with a burst of feeling, "you don't know how sorry I am for all these troubles and divisions amongst us. Mother, too, feels that we have been much to blame. Do you think Uncle Robertson would be friends, and forgive?"

"I hope, I believe he would. I should be so glad to do all in my power, for indeed I have had no part in causing division. Thank you for the letter. I must hurry home now, you understand why."

"Yes, to be sure. Good night. I do hope Fred will soon be better."

They parted, and Ellen went home with the precious letter in her hand, and her head somewhat confused at this unexpected meeting and Fanny's words.

She at once told her husband what had passed. He held out his hand eagerly for the letter, saying, "Let us see what it says, and then tell Frederic if it is aught good."

The contents proved, however, to be but another

disappointment. In answer to Fanny Pierson's inquiries, Mrs. Harris merely told her that her cousin had left Brooklands three weeks before, as she considered herself unable to perform the various duties required of her. That Mrs. Harris had since been applied to, to furnish a testimonial of Miss Robertson's character and qualifications, and had done so, but she had mislaid the letter of inquiry, or perhaps destroyed it, and could not remember the writer's address. If, however, she should find it, she would gladly forward it to her friends at Birkdale. The writer also expressed her surprise that Margaret had not informed her relatives of her intention to leave her situation, but imagined there was no real cause for uneasiness, as doubtless from the character furnished by Mrs. Harris, she had obtained employment elsewhere, and would soon write to relieve their anxiety.

This was all, and truly it was poor comfort for George Robertson and his wife, poor comfort to give her twin brother. Yet they thought it better to tell him, and they took Mrs. Harris's letter to his bedside and read it.

"I can see through it all, father," said the young man. "Maggie has been weighed down by over-work, of a kind, too, to which she had never been used, and unable to get through her duties she has left Mrs. Harris. Poor sister! That rebellious pride has prevented her from telling us of her failure in her first attempt to fight the battle of life alone, and so she has resolved we shall know nothing until we hear of her having obtained another situation. It is something to know that she was alive and well within the last three weeks. Will you write, father, and address your letter to Brooklands, so that if she should send any word to her late employer it might be forwarded?"

Robertson hesitated. "Some one shall write," he said.



"Don't refuse me, father. Say *you* will write. Tell Maggie I am not well, and how anxiously I have looked for news of her, and, for my sake, if you will not for her own, dear father, bid her come home."

Tears sprang into the father's eyes as he pressed his son's hand. "My dear Fred, I will write. I can't refuse what *you* ask, for no parent ever had a more dutiful son than you have always been."

"Those are pleasant words, mother, aren't they?" Fred's now flushed face had an unearthly beauty as he looked at his stepmother and asked the question. Then turning again to his father, "You'll not reproach Maggie for what is past, will you?"

"I will not, Fred. The letter shall be an invitation home, from a father who, whatever their faults, still loves his children, and I will think of you, my boy, while I write, then it will be all you could wish."

"Thank you, father. If it please God to spare me we *shall* yet be united in one unbroken family band. I will try to rest now. The thought of what you are going to do will bring me pleasant sleep, I think."

But sleep did not come. All through the night Fred was feverish and restless, so much so that Ellen did not feel comfortable to leave him. She therefore watched by his bed and longed for the arrival of the doctor. The light of morning shone upon her and the invalid before he came. Patty Jones had duly delivered her message, but Mr. Gray was absent with a patient, and some hours elapsed before he returned and learned that he had been summoned to Birkdale. Frederic Robertson was a great favourite with the doctor, and though wearied with being deprived of sleep, he would not attempt to take any until he had ridden over to visit the young man.

## CHAPTER XIX.

### A NEW NURSE—THE END OF THE SICKNESS.

"It is a case of fever, undoubtedly."

Such was Mr. Gray's reply to Ellen's question as to the state of her stepson. Then came directions about keeping the room cool, and letting in plenty of fresh air, &c. "But," said Mr. Gray, "I need hardly tell *you* what to do, Mrs. Robertson. You have had some experience, and your own love of cleanliness and pure air is a better teacher than I. You would be surprised how difficult I find it to persuade some people that the sick require room to breathe in, and not closely shut doors and drawn curtains, which exclude the pure atmosphere, and force them to breathe again and again the same poisoned air laden with disease. There was, for instance, a family in Woltown, named Turner. One of the children was attacked with fever, and the case promised to be a simple matter enough when I first saw the lad. But, owing to their neglect of the proper precautions with regard to the rest, and a determination to shut the foul air into their dwelling, and to keep out everything like a fresh breeze, it became serious enough. The fever assumed a malignant form, two of the children died, and the father just escaped."

"Do you know whether that family is still at Woltown, sir?" asked Robertson.

"Turner told me he was going to leave the place as soon as he was strong enough to be moved. He was getting round fast when I last saw him a fortnight ago."

"Then, sir, I understand how poor Fred has caught

the infection. Some people named Turner have come to Birkdale from Woltown. Fred and one of my men unpacked their furniture and set up their bedsteads for them, and both noticed how very ill the master of the house looked."

"I am very sorry to hear that. If it were possible to *bag a fever*, as people do game, those Turners were just the ones to do it by their perverse disregard of all teaching and want of common sense. They would be pretty sure to carry infection along with them. I trust all will go well with Frederic. He has youth, temperance, and cleanliness in his favour, and I am sure an admirable nurse in you, Mrs. Robertson."

Just as Mr. Gray was leaving, Fanny Pierson came up to the carpenter's door to inquire after her cousin. Ellen saw her, and stepped forward to prevent her entrance.

"You must not think me unkind," she said, "if I tell you to come no further. Poor Fred has got a fever of some sort, and I should not like you to run any risk of infection. He has been restless all night."

"Has any one been up with him?" asked Fanny.

"Yes, I have. I could not go comfortably to bed when he was tossing about in pain, poor fellow."

"I thought so; you look tired and pale, but you need not shut me out, for I am come to help you to nurse cousin Fred. You cannot do it by yourself, and who so fit to help you as I am, for I have nothing particular to do at home—at least mother can manage,—and I am very strong. Here is Uncle Robertson, I shall ask him. I have my mother's leave if you will both consent."

Fanny had, indeed, obtained her mother's permission to offer her help should Fred's illness threaten to be serious. She had obtained it by pleading Margaret's absence.

"If *she* had been at home, mother, she could have done all that was necessary, but we know not where

she is, and, oh mother, I always feel so condemned when I think how selfish we were towards Uncle Robertson. Let me show that we wish to make some amends by taking Maggie's place, as her mother's helper, and poor Fred's nurse. Don't talk about infection, dear; I would not run into it wilfully, or when there was no occasion, but in this case it seems to me to be a duty, always supposing that you consent. I could not go without."

"Fanny, you are all I have."

Aunt Pierson said those few words with a tremulous voice that expressed more than even they did.

"Yes, dear mother, and you will give your *all* into God's hands, will you not?"

It cost the widowed parent a struggle, but she consented at last, and Fanny went to offer her services to the Robertsons. The arguments she used convinced them also, and under her uncle's roof she undertook the duties of daughter and sister. Her going thither was a cause of considerable gossip in Birkdale, and amongst others, Mrs. Martin commented in no charitable spirit on the conduct of her niece, intimating that had Fred Robertson been old and ugly, instead of young and good-looking, Fanny would have thought twice before offering her services. That it was evident now she did not object to cousins; it was only the one who had thought more about her than she deserved that didn't suit. But Aunt Martin was very glad her Henry had got over his foolish fancy, and was going to be married to his master's daughter.

Fanny did not hear these remarks, and, owing to the nature of her cousin's illness, there were not many visitors at the house. If she had they would have caused her but temporary annoyance, for she was conscious of acting from a sense of duty. Her mother, too, came backwards and forwards, Robertson's younger children meanwhile being at their grandfather's, under Mary's care, both to keep the house quiet and preserve them from infection.

Thus passed a fortnight, and yet there was no change for the better in Frederic Robertson. Often during the time he was delirious, and then he would mistake Fanny for his sister, and call her Maggie, and beg her not to leave them again, as she was wanted at home. It was then that Fanny found her duties the most painful, and had hard work to repress her feelings so as not to add to the distress of others.

Mr. Gray began to look grave, then to hint at unfavourable symptoms. Soon his words took away all hope of Fred's ultimate recovery. The young man himself seemed to understand that his days were numbered, and in his quiet moments expressed his intense longing to see Margaret once again.

A second application to Mrs. Harris proved fruitless. That lady had not found the letter before alluded to, and could give them no clue to Maggie's address. She, however, promised, should she hear from her, to forward their letters immediately. "If I had addressed my reply to the lady who wrote to *inquire* respecting Miss Robertson," she said, "I should most likely be able to recollect where it was sent; but the applicant enclosed an envelope, stamped and directed, and having answered her questions I thought no more of the matter."

Fred had been three weeks ill, and the crisis came. It ended as they feared—in death. His one sorrow at the last was caused by the absence of his sister. "I did so pray that I might see her again on earth," he said; "but God for some wise end has seen fit to deny me this. But He has enabled me to say, 'Thy will, O God, not mine, be done.' The family chain will have a missing link still even when Maggie does come home. God grant that it may be made complete in that land where sorrow and parting are unknown. When Maggie does come, you will tell her how I wished for her, and longed to see her. Give her my love, and say, I pray God to bless her."

With words of peace and goodwill upon his lips the young man passed away to his rest.

There were other cases of typhus in Birkdale, but only this ended fatally, and many a kindly neighbour said, as poor Fred was carried to the grave, "the best always goes first," and that no better son was left behind in all the village.

A few days after the funeral the carpenter and his wife were surprised by a visit from Mrs. Raynor, Ellen's former mistress and much-respected teacher. The good lady had been for several years absent from Birkdale, but was now spending a little time with an old friend in the neighbourhood, and almost immediately after her arrival she heard of young Robertson's death, and called to condole with his parents. There was much both to hear and tell, and Ellen, knowing the warm interest Mrs. Raynor had ever taken in her welfare, gave her an account of all that had befallen her during the interval which had elapsed since their last meeting.

That part which related to Margaret's absence made the lady unusually thoughtful. "It may be," said she, "that a lady who is a friend of mine, and who is still more intimate with my sister-in-law, can give us a clue to Margaret's whereabouts. Of course, Ellen, you have not forgotten my husband's sister, with whom you lived for a short time after her marriage?"

Ellen said she was not likely to forget a lady from whom she had received so much kindness.

"Well, my sister-in-law and Mr. Selkirk are at present visiting a valued friend, and my sister, who tells me everything that interests her—you know what long letters we always used to exchange—has once or twice alluded to a young person who has lately taken the situation of nursemaid to her friend's children. She is about Margaret's age, and her Christian name is the same. My sister tells me that her manners and education are superior to her position, and that ever since she first saw her she has been haunted by the

idea that her features are familiar, though she cannot tell where she has seen them before."

"If it is Margaret," returned Ellen, "Mrs. Selkirk often saw her as a child when you and Mr. Raynor were at Birkdale, and she used to be staying with you. Maggie was always very much like her own poor mother, and she is still."

"I will write directly, and ask my sister to find out, if possible, whether your husband's daughter is really in the same house with herself. I am sure she will manage the matter with all kindness. She knows I am in the neighbourhood. I sent her a Woltown newspaper yesterday, to tell her of my arrival."

In order to perform her promise, Mrs. Raynor took a somewhat hasty leave of Ellen, but first advised her not to mention their conjectures to her husband, lest disappointment should again follow these inquiries.

We will, however, solve the mystery in the meanwhile, and give an outline of Margaret's doings from the time she parted with her aunt and cousin, when they left their home at Ashleybridge for the cottage at Birkdale. She had undertaken the almost entire charge of Mrs. Harris's four children, with no very clear ideas respecting the duties she would have to perform, only that she was to teach the two elder ones, to wash and dress all but the very least, and to sew for all. And Margaret had been accustomed to none of these things. Her experience of children was far less than Mary Jones's had been when she took charge of Margaret and her brothers after their mother's death. She certainly was a clever needlewoman, so could manage the sewing part, and as to teaching, she thought she must know far more than those little children would require to be instructed in. But Margaret did not know that before we can teach even the simplest elements of education we have much to learn. We may understand a subject, yet be very ignorant how to impart our knowledge to others.

Mrs. Harris was what some would call easy and







good-natured. Selfish would be the better word to apply, and such Margaret soon found her to be. The children's clothes were all out of order, and their mother explained the reason of this to her new assistant.

"The nurse from whom I have lately parted was to have kept all these things right, but she has neglected them sadly, and I am too much engaged to do much sewing. However, I have no doubt you will soon reduce them to proper order, Miss Robertson. You will not be interfered with so long as things go on comfortably. I am not strong, and shall like you to manage your own way."

The sum of the matter was really this. Mrs. Harris intended to shift the whole of her maternal duties on to the shoulders of Margaret. She showed her the load of work which was to be done, but offered no help in the doing. She professed not to interfere, nor did she, except to find fault if Margaret, amid her accumulation of duties, failed to perform any one of them. The young woman found that her work would be incessant, that leisure she would have none, either for study or rest, and that in her own person she was expected to fill the places of mother, governess, nurse and seamstress.

Yet Margaret persevered for some months, upheld rather by pride than any better feeling. She would not be a burthen to her aunt Pierson; she would have thought it too humiliating to go to her father and ask to share the duties of a more humble home, under the guidance of her stepmother; there was, therefore, nothing for it but to work on as best she could. At length both her health and spirits gave way, and she was compelled to tell Mrs. Harris that she felt herself unequal to such manifold duties, and must therefore seek another situation.

She accordingly left Brooklands, but in place of returning to Ashleybridge, where she was known, she journeyed in an opposite direction, resolving not to

communicate with her friends until she had obtained employment. Mrs. Harris could not refuse to answer any application as to character, and Margaret was resolved not again to undertake the variety of duties which had weighed her down so completely when in that lady's service.

She had the little money given her by her aunt Pierson at parting, and her half-year's salary almost untouched; she therefore resolved to take a fortnight's rest, and in a quiet country place, seventy miles from Brooklands, she obtained lodgings for that time. Her landlady, a motherly body, was interested in Margaret, and to her the young woman expressed a wish to obtain employment as soon as her health should be a little recruited.

"I would like to help you, Miss," she said, "and if you'd wanted a nursemaid's place instead of a governess's, I might ha' done something. I was housekeeper up at the Hall for years before I was married, and though the old master is dead, and there's a young one now, he was a boy at that time; and Mrs. Edwards, that's his lady, would take any person of my recommending. A governess they don't want, but a nurse for their two children they're on the look out for at this present. And I can tell you that their nurse has a far easier time than a many governesses, and gets as much salary too. Beside, there's a young girl under her."

Margaret remembered her last situation, where, with the name of governess only, she had performed the duties of nurse and seamstress too, and began to think whether it would not be better to try for this place, especially as the salary would be really liberal. But then came the humbling thought, "Am I qualified for this situation?"

Margaret had learned to be more doubtful of herself since she began to experience what it was to undertake unaccustomed duties, and she had found that those pertaining to the humblest station require something

of an apprenticeship, in order that they may be well performed. She however resolved to try, and intimated her intention to her hostess.

"I'll go up to the Hall myself and see Mrs. Edwards," said the good dame, and she performed her promise that very day. She came back in high spirits, told Margaret that the situation was still open, and, though there were other applicants, she thought there was little doubt her lodger would be engaged if she would call on Mrs. Edwards in the morning.

Margaret thanked her landlady for the trouble she had taken, and promised to do so. At the appointed time she went to the Hall and saw its mistress. In answer to the various questions asked, she told Mrs. Edwards that her experience was small, that she had only been in one situation, the nature of which she frankly explained, and that she had taken it after the death of a near relative, by whom she had been adopted. Mrs. Edwards was pleased with her appearance, a reference to Mrs. Harris confirmed the truth of her story, and Margaret was engaged. She found her duties very light in comparison with those of her last situation, and was treated both with kindness and consideration by the mistress of the Hall.

Mrs. Edwards, far from wishing to leave her children entirely to the care of others, watched over them with all the anxiety of a Christian mother, and lost no opportunity of sowing good seed in the minds of her little ones. Hers was very different from the life of ease and selfish indulgence which Margaret had hitherto pictured as the certain accompaniment of wealth. Amongst her children, servants, and especially her poorer neighbours, the influence of her loving, yet diligent labours was daily felt. And, as Margaret saw her mistress work untiringly wherever she felt she could do good, and ever ready to answer the call of duty in preference to that of luxury or selfish ease, she was deeply impressed by her example.

She could not but be sensible, in comparing this life with her own past doings, how different had been her conduct, how readily she had listened to the call of inclination rather than duty, how constantly she had preferred self-indulgence to the welfare of others.

Tender thoughts of her own distant home and friends came when she saw the beautiful spirit of peace, love, and unity that reigned in the house of her employers, and heard Mrs. Edwards speak of the value of cherishing this spirit beneath every roof, however humble it might be.

Margaret almost made up her mind to write home to tell her father all that had befallen her, to own the faults of which she was now conscious, and acknowledge how pride had been suffered to take such deep root in her heart as to stifle natural affection. A little remnant of false shame made her still hesitate. She had been proud and boastful of what she would do rather than return to Birkdale. Should she now ask for a place in the home she had despised? Should she let her stepmother, on whom she had looked down, know that she had taken a servant's place, and was performing its duties? It would be no small humiliation to do this. She was scarcely prepared for it as yet.

Then Maggie thought of Fred—the dear twin brother to whose appeals, when he urged her to do right, she had turned a deaf ear. Yet had she not found out the truth of his words, “that true happiness is to be found only in the path of duty, however humble that may be?”

Margaret was longing for news from home. There might perhaps be letters lying for her at Brooklands, though, as she had not answered the last two, either from her brother or cousin, it was hardly likely they would have written again. At any rate, she resolved at once to send a line to Mrs. Harris, and ask her to forward them if any had arrived.

Margaret opened her desk, and at once wrote a

brief note to her late employer at Brooklands. She had finished this, but, before closing the desk, she lingered a little over its contents, and opened a morocco case that contained the watch and chain which had been her mother's. These, with the other little trinkets formerly mentioned, had been given to her at Ellen's earnest request, as soon as she was old enough to take charge of them.

Margaret had not worn her watch and chain since she entered upon her present situation, because she thought them inconsistent with the place she occupied at the Hall. Both were very good, and of handsome workmanship, and, though rather old-fashioned, Margaret had never felt a wish to exchange these, which had been her mother's, for more modern ones. She sat for a moment looking at them; and all the memories they suggested brought tears into her eyes. While so engaged, Mrs. Edwards entered the nursery, unobserved by Margaret, until she heard her name uttered in the voice of her mistress.

"Don't disturb yourself, Margaret," said the lady, kindly; "I only looked in to say that Mr. Edwards has taken the children with him, as he was going to drive round by the Priory ruins with Mr. and Mrs. Selkirk. They will probably not return for an hour or more." Then, observing the traces of tears on Margaret's face, Mrs. Edwards added, "Are you not well?"

"Yes, thank you, ma'am, quite well. But I had been looking over some letters and little matters that brought—"

"That brought to your mind some dear one whom God has been pleased to take from this world?"

"I was thinking of my mother. This was hers," she added, observing that Mrs. Edwards noticed the watch and chain which she still held in her hand.

"Indeed. Can you then recollect your mother, Margaret? I thought you said she died when you were a child."

"I was nine years old ; but I can remember her quite distinctly."

Margaret was going to replace the watch and chain in her desk, when Mrs. Edwards said, "If you choose to wear this memento of your mother, pray do so. I cannot help thinking you have some trouble pressing upon you, and though I have no wish to pry into your affairs, yet if you think I can relieve it, and are inclined to trust me, remember I have no greater satisfaction than I find in promoting the happiness of those around me."

More might perhaps have been said, but Mrs. Edwards, hearing the sound of wheels, looked out of the window, and perceived the carriage returning empty. Anxious for the safety of those who were lately its occupants, she hastened to make inquiry. It turned out that a slight accident to one of the wheels had prevented the intended drive, and that her husband, children, and guests were coming back to the Hall on foot.

The arrival of the young people a few minutes later obliged Margaret to put away her writing materials for the rest of the evening, and the letter to her father remained unwritten.

## CHAPTER XX.

### WHAT THE NEWSPAPER TOLD MARGARET.

MARGARET had often heard her stepmother mention a Mrs. Selkirk, sister to the former vicar of Birkdale, with whom she had lived for a short time. But this was during her residence at home, and before the years spent as a member of her uncle Pierson's family at Ashleybridge. For a long time past the names of those on whom Ellen always thought with a respect amounting almost to veneration, as friends and teachers, as well as employers, had not been mentioned in Margaret's hearing. Still, as a child, she had known Mr. Raynor and his wife, and when Mrs. Selkirk came to visit at the Hall, she thought it not unlikely that she might be the same who was sister to the worthy clergyman whom Birkdale folk still loved to talk about as their former pastor. A little incident occurred on the morning after Mrs. Edwards surprised her in tears, which rather served to confirm this idea.

Margaret had been into the kitchen for some necessary article, and was returning, when the housekeeper stopped her. "Margaret," she said, "here are two letters and a paper for Mrs. Selkirk. She is in the mistress's room, I think. The gentlemen have just gone out, and I believe the ladies are going into the village. Will you carry these up-stairs in your hand?"

Margaret readily took the letters and newspaper, and while carrying them upstairs she observed that the latter was the "Wolftown Express," the reporter



of all the events which occurred in and about the neighbourhood of her old home at Birkdale.

When she lived at Ashleybridge, the "Express" used to come regularly, every Friday, sent by the Martins to Uncle Pierson so long as the families were friendly. She remembered how anxious they all used to be for the first sight of it, and how every bit of intelligence interested them sadly or pleasantly, as the case might be. Perhaps the marriage of a former schoolfellow brought smiles to their faces and good wishes to their lips; or the death of an old neighbour would call up a tear and a sigh instead. But all news from Birkdale had its interest for the little circle at Ashleybridge.

The sight of the small damp sheet had a still greater charm for Margaret Robertson now, when it came so unexpectedly into her hands, and while her heart was filled with yearnings after home and absent friends. Indeed, it was with a feeling of positive reluctance that she placed it in the hands of the lady to whom it was addressed, and left the room.

To Mrs. Selkirk the outside of the newspaper was evidently of more consequence than any intelligence which the printed matter might give. She just glanced at the address, remarking as she did so, "This is from Emily. She has sent me the paper merely to let me know of her safe arrival." Then without even untying the string which fastened it, she laid the newspaper down upon the table and read her letters.

Not long afterwards Margaret saw Mrs. Edwards, accompanied by the children and her visitor, leave the house, and walk in the direction of the village. Still longing for a peep at the "Wolftown Express," she went into the room they had recently quitted, with the intention of taking at least a hasty glance of its contents. To her great disappointment she found that the paper was lying unopened on the table, and she went away into the nursery ready to cry with vexation even while blaming herself for such childish conduct. She

sat down to some needlework, but while her fingers were occupied with it, the thought of the little country newspaper haunted her constantly. Its very arrival confirmed the idea that Mrs. Selkirk was probably the same lady of whom she had often heard her step-mother speak, but *she* evidently did not care much for Wolftown news now. Nor was it likely she should, when so many years had passed since her relatives left that neighbourhood. Perhaps, after all, the paper might lie unopened for days, and finally be cast aside without Margaret's having a chance to see it.

Not for all the world would Margaret have been guilty of the meanness of prying into her mistress's affairs, or of reading even the smallest scrap of writing that might be left about. Mrs. Edwards or any inhabitant of the Hall might have left letters, drawers, or desk lying open from morning to night, and they would have remained as safe from curious eyes as though under lock and seal, had all been like Margaret, as all ought to be with respect to such matters. But the newspaper was different, and she so much wished to see it. To open it, she argued, would be taking a liberty which she was well assured would be willingly granted if she were to ask for it, but Margaret did not want to say anything which might cause her interest in that particular neighbourhood to be suspected. She intended to write home, but was resolved that the first communication with her friends at Birkdale should be made of her own free will.

When Mrs. Edwards went into the village she usually spent some hours in visiting the cottagers, and sometimes not only the children but Margaret herself accompanied her to carry little gifts and comforts for the poorest amongst them. There was not in any case much probability of her speedy return. Margaret stepped into the room where the newspaper lay, and yielding to the temptation, untied the string, and began to look over the contents. First of all she looked at the corner where she knew the list of mar-

riages and deaths would be, and she smiled as she read, amongst the former, the name of her cousin Henry Martin.

"So he has married his master's daughter. He has soon got over his liking for Fanny. How proud Aunt Martin will be to think of her favourite son marrying the only child of one of the richest tradesmen in Wolftown," thought Margaret.

There were no other names that she knew amongst the couples that had been lately joined together, but the smile which the thought of Aunt Martin's exultation had brought to her lip, was still lingering there when, almost at the head of the more melancholy record which followed, Margaret read these words—

"On the 18th inst. at Birkdale, of typhus fever, Frederic, eldest son of Mr. George Robertson, carpenter."

Thus did Margaret receive the first tidings of her twin brother's death. We will not attempt to describe the effect of the intelligence. When Mrs. Edwards and her guest entered the room a few minutes later they found Margaret lying on the floor in a state of insensibility, the newspaper still clenched in her hand. Means were immediately used to restore her to consciousness, but the very waking was a terrible one to the unhappy girl, who was utterly prostrated by this sudden shock.

As soon as possible Margaret was undressed and conveyed to bed, as it was evident she was too ill to sit up, and when she became a little more composed Mrs. Edwards went to try to ascertain the cause of her illness. All false pride and shame were gone now, and in her utter prostration, both of mind and body, Margaret was only too thankful to pour out, as strength would permit, the whole story of her life into the ear of one so kind.

Her tale was interrupted by many a burst of intense grief and remorse, but by degrees Mrs. Edwards was made acquainted with Margaret's estrangement

from home and friends, together with the punishment which had just fallen upon her in the discovery of her twin brother's death.

"They could not send me word of his illness," she said, "for I had shut out all intelligence from home by my own act. But I am indeed punished."

In the present state of Margaret's feelings she required comfort rather than blame. The condemnation of her own heart, together with the tidings that had affected her so sadly, were a sufficient punishment. Had any increase been needed the following morning's post would have brought it; for, in compliance with Margaret's request, Mrs. Harris forwarded the letters that had been lying at Brooklands. There was the last poor Frederic ever wrote, another from Fanny Pierson, and a third from her own father—the letter written at the request of his son when the young man's illness commenced. And there was yet a fourth, edged and sealed with black, containing the particulars of Fred's sickness and death. What bitter tears were shed over those letters, what an aching heart Margaret had when she read them, can never be told.

By the same post came the one written by Mrs. Raynor to her sister-in-law. Margaret was, of course, most anxious to communicate with her father and friends at Birkdale. As she was really unable to write, Mrs. Edwards kindly undertook to do so for her, and Mrs. Selkirk, whose interest was fully aroused, likewise wrote at length to Mrs. Raynor, so that the carpenter's sorrowing family were at once made acquainted with all the particulars of Maggie's position, as also of her earnest desire to rejoin them, and strive to fill a daughter's place and perform a daughter's duties.

When Frederic Robertson was on his deathbed, we know how great had been his desire, how constant his prayer, that he might see his sister, but that he had said, "God for some wise end has seen fit to deny me

this," and unobtrusively he had submitted to the will of Him whose "ways are not as our ways."

Perhaps a lighter trial than that which fell upon Margaret Robertson might have produced a less lasting impression. But the lesson, though a very severe, proved a salutary one to the truant daughter. As soon as she was able to undertake the journey she returned to Birkdale, literally with the words of the prodigal on her lips and in her heart. And she received a like welcome. There were no reproaches, no allusion to past faults, but a father's arms were held open to receive her, and a father's voice exclaimed, "My child, my dear Margaret! Thank God, though long lost she is now found."

She was forgiven before she could ask for pardon.

And Ellen, poor Ellen! She stood by, weeping for gladness, for in the coming of Margaret she saw the fulfilment of prayers offered for many a year past in faith that the answer *would* come, though it might be long delayed. She heard it, as well as saw it, when her stepdaughter, released from her father's welcoming clasp, threw her arms round her neck and said—

"I can see it all now. I have done you a great wrong; but forgive me, 'mother.' You shall help me, if you will, to perform my duty as a daughter as you have performed yours as wife and mother."

And Ellen, her heart overflowing with joy and thankfulness, said, "Dear Maggie, I have always loved you. My own best strength is only weakness, but we will henceforth go together to 'Him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we can ask or think.'"

## CHAPTER XXI.

### CONCLUSION—THREE YEARS AFTER.

THREE years have passed since Margaret Robertson returned to her father's roof. Several changes have taken place in that time, but in none of those who are still living is the alteration so great as in herself. Not so much outwardly. The features and complexion are the same, she is still too young in years to show any difference there, especially as she has been blessed with excellent health ever since she came back to her native village. Yet everybody says that the likeness to her mother, always striking, is now more remarkable than ever, though no one can say that form or features have changed. Perhaps, if we were to ask her father or Ellen we should ascertain how the change has come about. They would say that Margaret has grown like her mother in mind, and that the inward change has wrought its outward effect on her face. In short the new light is from within. The eyes of Margaret's understanding have been enlightened by that Spirit which can alone awake the sleeper and give sight to those who are spiritually blind.

The carpenter's eldest daughter has been for three years the comfort of her father's home, the staff and stay of her stepmother. We look in upon her again as she is about to leave it for another. It has been settled, any time these twelve months, that she is to be the wife of her brother's old friend and school-fellow, Charles Murray, the same on whom she once looked slightly on account of his homely dress and

exterior, but of whose real merit she was not even then quite insensible, though the pride that had been so long fostered in her prevented her acknowledging it.

When Margaret learned to see herself in a different light, she was led to wonder how Charles could have preferred her in that old time; nay, that he could continue to care so much for her through these years, especially as their positions are much altered. Maggie is but the daughter of the village carpenter, Charles holds a very responsible situation, has an excellent salary, and it is thought will rise to something much higher still. There is no doubt, however, that Maggie is far more worthy of a good man's love now, than when, dressed in silk and lace, she looked down upon the cottager's son in the streets at Ashleybridge.

Margaret might have been married some time ago, but she would not leave father and mother until Jenny was old enough to leave school and take her place in the house. The effect of Ellen's example will doubtless be seen should Margaret become a wife and mother in her turn.

Old James Richards rests beside his wife in Birkdale churchyard, and the same grand yew that shades his grave spreads its aged arms over those where lie George Robertson's first wife, baby Willie, and poor Fred. Yet, after Margaret came back, they never counted that there was a missing link in the family chain, because they considered those dear ones as only "gone before."

Mary Jones—we call her by the name most familiar, though she changed it so long ago—lives in the cottage where James Richards used to dwell. She has several little children growing up around her, but we may be sure they have not been dosed with "quietness," or taught to speak truth with their lips and deny it by their actions. Her one great fault, while it brought bitter punishment, brought also repentance "not to be repented of," and by God's blessing

has been the means of making her an estimable wife and mother.

Fanny Pierson is still unmarried, and living with her only parent at Birkdale. She is to be Margaret's bridesmaid, for the Robertsons and Piersons have been the best of friends and kin since Fanny went to be her cousin Fred's nurse during the fever which shortened his days, and deprived the carpenter of the very staff of his age.

Of the Martins we will say but little. Uncle Martin is a prosperous man, and all his children are thriving too; but in other things there is little change, except, perhaps, that Aunt Martin's tongue is rather sharper, her judgments more severe, than even of old. She boasts of having been consistent in her conduct, of not having acted like her sister Pierson in going over to the enemy, as she considers our old friend Ellen. But Aunt Pierson is a far happier woman than when she allowed her strong-minded, hard-tempered sister to influence her against her own more kindly nature. And she says that though she bears Hannah no ill-will, and rejoices to know of her prosperity, there are things in which she is quite sure they couldn't agree now, and so it is better they should be apart.

Mrs. Martin is, in her own person, a proof of the assertion that there is no standing still. We must either make progress or go backwards. As her heart has not been softened by grace, we need not be surprised to learn that her infirmities of temper have increased with her years, and that Aunt Martin, who was reckoned "a hard woman" by her neighbours in her young days, is now seen to be harder still. Hers is the sort of nature which was not likely to be softened by great prosperity.

Our last glance will be a pleasant one—at Margaret standing before the Lord's Table in her simple wedding dress, while parents and friends are around her, joining in the beautiful prayers of the Marriage Service with heart and voice; and George Robertson,



a white-haired man now, though not an old one, feels that as he gives his daughter he is gaining a son in place of the one who was taken away. In reviewing his past life he sees how graciously he has been dealt with ; that though he has known bereavements, his losses have been more than made up to him, and that he has always had cause to say, "The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away ; blessed be the Name of the Lord."

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